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**SOCIETAL GAPS IN ATTITUDES  
REGARDING CONSCRIPTION: THE CASE  
OF ESTONIA**

Master thesis

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I have written this Master thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. CONSCRIPTION TRENDS AND RELATED DEBATES .....</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1. CONTEMPORARY TRENDS OF CONSCRIPTION.....	9
1.2. IMPETUSES FOR THE DECLINE OF CONSCRIPTION .....	12
1.3. REASONS FOR RETAINING OR REVIVING CONSCRIPTION .....	15
1.4. PUBLIC OPINION AND SUPPORT TOWARDS CONSCRIPTION .....	16
1.5. HYPOTHESES .....	21
<b>2. CASE SELECTION, METHODS AND DATA.....</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1. CASE SELECTION.....	22
2.1.1. <i>Background</i> .....	22
2.1.2. <i>Re-establishment of armed forces</i> .....	23
2.1.3. <i>Conscription in Estonia</i> .....	24
2.1.4. <i>Attitudes regarding conscription in Estonia</i> .....	26
2.2. SURVEY DATA .....	27
2.3. INTERVIEW DATA.....	30
2.4. METHODS .....	31
2.4.1. <i>Method of analysis</i> .....	32
<b>3. FINDINGS: SOCIETAL GAPS IN ATTITUDES REGARDING CONSCRIPTION .....</b>	<b>33</b>
3.1. OVERVIEW OF THE PUBLIC SURVEYS RESULTS 2007-2018 .....	33
3.1.1. <i>Comparing conscripts and the general public</i> .....	33
3.1.2. <i>Variation across age groups</i> .....	37
3.1.3. <i>Variation across the language of communication</i> .....	39
3.1.4. <i>Variation in conscripts' willingness to go to conscript service</i> .....	41
3.2. FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: EXPLAINING THE GAPS IN ATTITUDES TOWARDS CONSCRIPTION .....	43
3.2.1. <i>Gap between conscripts and general public</i> .....	44
3.2.2. <i>Gap between young and elderly population</i> .....	47
3.2.3. <i>Gap between Estonian-speakers and non-Estonian speakers</i> .....	48
3.2.4. <i>Willingness of conscripts to go to military service based on their language of communication</i> .....	51
3.2.6. <i>Summary of main empirical findings</i> .....	54
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>57</b>

<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>67</b>
SAMPLE INFORMATION OF THE SURVEY “PUBLIC OPINION AND NATIONAL DEFENCE” (MINISTRY OF DEFENCE 2001-2019). .....	75
SAMPLE INFORMATION OF THE SURVEY “OPINIONSABOUT ESTONIAN DEFENCE FORCES BEFORE AND AFTER CONSCRIPTION” (DEFENCE RESOURCES AGENCY 2007-2016). .....	77

## **ABSTRACT**

While many countries have replaced conscription with professional voluntary armies, some have retained it. In democratic countries public opinion is essential for policymaking, this applies also for security and defence policies. There are only few countries where public opinion towards conscription has been studied continuously over time, Estonia being one of them. When examining public support for conscription it is also important to look into differences in public opinion among different societal groups over time. The objective of the thesis was to explore whether and how attitudes towards conscription vary across different social groups as well as over time, and to offer and evaluate possible explanations for why these variations exist. This thesis develops and tests four hypotheses focusing on differences between societal groups in Estonia in their attitudes towards conscript service, using a multimethod design. The quantitative data was extracted from three opinion surveys and the qualitative data was extracted from nine expert interviews with a purpose to find possible explanations to those existing differences. The empirical results show that even when attitude among the general public of Estonia towards conscript service is highly supportive, gaps exist between younger and older generations, Estonian and Russian-speaking residents, and between conscripts and general population. The results of expert interviews suggest that possible explanations for variations across age groups include different threat perceptions among younger and older generations. A possible reason for the variation between conscripts and general population is that those young people who are conscripted have their own 'skin in the game' and their freedom is constrained. Reasons why variations exist among people with different language of communication are language barriers and different information spaces.

Keywords: conscription, public opinion, national defence, Estonia, Russian-speaking minority

## INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War there has been a tendency in European countries to terminate or abolish conscription. While many countries have replaced conscription with professional voluntary armies, some have retained it. Those who have opted for voluntary armies, have done so to push for more professionalization of the armies and international cooperation as well as reduction of costs, since maintaining conscription and building reserve armies tends to be more expensive than keeping a certain number of professional soldiers. Those countries that have decided to keep conscription in place usually have a combined version of army consisting of both professionals and reservists. Countries are more likely to maintain conscription if they have an unfriendly neighbour. One of the arguments for keeping conscription is to develop and strengthen the country's own independent defence capabilities in order to be able to counter external threats. In light of the changing trends of conscription becoming popular once again in some parts of Europe and elsewhere, it is important to look into differences in public opinion among different societal groups and over time.

In European countries where conscription system has been kept in place, there is usually significant public support for that. However, it is also important to research public support more in depth, in order to understand possible differences among various social groups within the society. As in democratic countries public opinion has a direct influence on public policy, it is important for the policy makers to have knowledge of the public's opinion on a certain matter. It is essential for better decision-making process and public communication. Acceptance by the public is especially important in those countries where citizens have to directly participate in national defence, i.e., in case of mobilization, or if the country's national security and defence capabilities are directly dependent on citizens' readiness to contribute.

The objective of the thesis is to explore whether and how attitudes towards conscription vary across different social groups as well as over time, and to offer and evaluate possible explanations for why these variations exist. In this research, Estonia is used as a case study. Estonia has a complex geopolitical location that affects the country's defence strategy greatly. Shortly after the country regained independence in 1991, Estonia started

to re-establish its Defence Forces. It continued universal military service obligation for young men, which had been used also during the Soviet occupation. Estonia remained the only country among new members of NATO that decided to keep a compulsory draft system in place. An important factor that shapes Estonia's defence planning is the large Russian-speaking minority whose threat perceptions and attitudes on security matters differ from those of Estonian speakers.

The thesis maps trends in public support to conscription over the period from 2005 to 2019 and across different social groups, using survey data from three survey studies commissioned by the Estonian Ministry of Defence, Estonian Defence Resources Agency and Centre of Excellence for Strategic Sustainability. These surveys show that there has been strong public support for maintaining reserve army concept and conscription service in Estonia throughout the years. At the same time, certain differences can be identified among various social groups in their attitudes regarding conscription, including gap between younger and older generations, Estonian and Russian-speaking residents, and between conscripts and general population. However, the surveys do not analyse possible reasons for why these gaps exist. This thesis is aiming to identify and evaluate different explanations for why there are different attitudes towards conscription among various societal groups in Estonia. Better understanding of the differences in the attitudes towards conscription among various groups of society helps to draw attention to existing gaps in national defence strategies as well as in coordination of the military service. Public's opinion towards conscription service is especially important in a country like Estonia that exercises a comprehensive national defence concept which also involves civil society. The thesis suggests that finding and understanding the reasons of these gaps would help policy makers to evaluate possible weaknesses of the system and consider certain changes in defence policies. Understanding the differences would help to promote national service and improve civil-military cooperation within the society.

In order to achieve its objectives, the thesis combines quantitative data from three large survey studies with qualitative data from nine expert interviews. The first survey study "Public opinion and national defence", commissioned by the Estonian Ministry of Defence, has studied general public's opinion on the country's national defence topics annually since 2001. The other two survey studies have concentrated on conscripts' own

opinion about compulsory military service before and after their service. The first one – “Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription”, commissioned by the Estonian Defence Resources Agency – covers the years from 2007-2015. The second one – “Problematic Relations During Conscription: Results of the Conscripts’ Survey 2016-2018“, was commissioned by the Centre of Excellence for Strategic Sustainability. There were nine structured expert interviews conducted with experts in the field both from civilian and military sector. The interviews were carried out over the course of April 2020. The interviewees were selected based on their competence and availability.

The thesis is organized in three chapters. The first chapter concentrates on conscription trends and related debates, the reasons for its decline as well as for its popularity. The first chapter also gives an overview of compulsory military service system in Estonia. Four hypotheses are proposed at the end of the first chapter which will be tested in order to attain the objective of the thesis. The second chapter provides background information on Estonia – the case selected for this study. The second chapter also explains the methods and data used. The third chapter presents the results of the thesis in two parts, using multimethod design. The first part presents the combination of data from three different surveys analysing support towards conscription over the course of time from 2005 to 2019. The second part presents the results from the expert interviews, using thematic analysis to present the interview data. The conclusions reflect on the findings, their relevance as well as the limitations of the study.



# **1. CONSCRIPTION TRENDS AND RELATED DEBATES**

The first chapter aims to explain the two key concepts of the work – ‘conscription’ and ‘societal gaps in attitudes towards conscription’. While doing so, it firstly gives an overview of contemporary trends of conscription primarily in Europe and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, asking which countries have ended conscription, where it is still in place and what are the reasons behind these choices. The chapter concentrates especially on the socio-political reasons for the decline of conscription in order to explain differences among various societal groups towards conscription. Last but not least, the chapter gives an overview of contemporary literature on public opinion towards conscription and military service in general. Four hypotheses are proposed at the end of the first chapter which are tested in order to attain the objective of the thesis.

## **1.1. Contemporary trends of conscription**

The general understanding of conscription is that it is a compulsory enlistment of men, and in some places also women, into a country’s military service. The core principle of practicing conscription during peace time has been to prepare conscripts for crises or war and to produce reserve units which is the main manpower during the wartime. While the world is in constant change, with shifting geopolitics, rapid development of technology and changing societal norms, conscription as a crucial tool, yet a controversial duty for many, has changed its form or even disappeared in some parts of the world. Currently, the majority of countries in the world do not have conscription in place, whereas less than one third of countries actually draft people in their defence forces. There are 23 countries where conscription is legalized but not implemented at present, 60 countries where compulsory military service is authorized and enforced in some form, and 108 countries where there is no judicial clause for conscription and in 23 out of those 108 countries a regular military is absent (Desilver, 2019).

There are various forms of conscription being practiced all around the world. The most widespread is universal service requirement, in which all or almost all of the target population has to serve a certain time in their country’s armed forces. The other common system is selective service system where conscripts are chosen by the military among all

those who register, whereas registration by a certain group of population – usually men of certain age – is regulated by the law. In 11 countries out of those 60 where conscription is authorized and conducted, both men and women are drafted (*Ibid.*). Israel, Eritrea, Mali, Morocco, North Korea and Tunisia conscript women as part of universal military service system; Benin, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Norway and Sweden recruit men and women through selective service systems (*Ibid.*). Additionally, there are some countries that have legalized women's draft by the law but actually conscript only men, such as Sudan and Vietnam (*Ibid.*). There are also countries that do not have active draft but have foreseen the inclusion of both men and women if conscription was ever practiced, those including Burma (Myanmar), Chad, Ivory Coast and Portugal (*Ibid.*).

Until World War II conscription was seen as a social norm in Europe and remained a common practice throughout the Cold War. It was not before 1960s when the United Kingdom (in 1963) and Luxembourg (in 1967) paved the way for a change by abolishing or suspending compulsory military service. The United States followed the example in 1973. Unlike the UK and Luxembourg where the debate for a change was among experts and academics (Boene, 2009) the decision to end conscription in the US was politically motivated and influenced by the public opinion. There was a strong anti-war sentiment in the US, especially among the youth, that grew into anti-Vietnam war movement already during the first years of the involvement of American troops in the war between 1964-1975. In addition to public discontent with the Vietnam War the liberal deferment regulation and use of lottery system caused a sentiment of injustice and 'biased selectiveness' of mandatory military service (Poutvaara & Wagener, 2011, p. 36).

The majority of European countries and member states of NATO continued to practice compulsory military service even after the end of the Cold War. However, over the course of the 1990s most of the West European states decreased their defence budget and majority suspended or abolished conscript service in 2000's. Most European and NATO countries suspended or abolished conscription between 2002 and 2011 (Bieri, 2015, p. 2). After the Cold War, Belgium<sup>1</sup> was the first member state of NATO and EU to transfer from conscription to volunteer army in 1994, the next was the Netherlands in 1996, followed by France and Spain in 2001 (Manigart, 2012, p. 1). It was mainly due to the

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<sup>1</sup> Luxembourg, the UK and the US had already abolished conscription before the end of the Cold War.

change of geopolitical situation in Europe – collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union – that pushed for the political elites of the aforementioned countries not to support large standing armies for territorial defence (Jehn & Selden, 2002, p. 95). Countries like France, Italy, Spain and Portugal had already cut their active-duty forces during the 1990s and reached the level at which there was no need to conscript a large proportion of the draft-age cohort, which meant selective conscription and raised the political question “who shall serve when not all serve?” (*Ibid.*).

The developments in Belgium and the Netherlands, France and Spain of suspending conscription and opting for all-volunteer forces caused a bandwagon effect on the continent. Since 2004 there has been a continuous change in multiple groups of countries in Europe where mandatory military service was exchanged with volunteer army: Portugal, Slovenia and Hungary in 2004; Italy and Czech Republic in 2005; Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Slovakia in 2006; Latvia, Montenegro and Romania in 2007; Bulgaria and Croatia in 2008; Lithuania and Poland in 2009; Albania and Sweden in 2010; Germany and Serbia in 2011; Ukraine in 2014. None of the aforementioned countries found it reasonable to keep universal conscription and therefore opted for all-volunteer forces.

All Central and Eastern European countries that joined NATO in 1999 (Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary), 2004 (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia), 2009 and later (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia) suspended or abolished conscription before joining the alliance. Estonia remained the only country among new members of NATO that decided to keep a compulsory draft system in place. Estonia, after regaining its independence in 1991, was mentored by Finland, including in military sphere. Finland, which is not member of NATO, but has geopolitically as complex location as Estonia, has practiced conscription throughout the Cold War until today.

Together with Estonia there are eighteen countries in Europe that have conscription in place today: Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Georgia, Greece, Lithuania, Moldova, Norway, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine. While in Norway and Sweden obligatory service applies for both male and female, women can voluntarily participate in three countries including Denmark, Estonia and

Finland (Rongé & Abrate, 2019, pp. 4-7). Some countries have revived conscription system after suspending it: Ukraine suspended its draft system in 2013 but revived it shortly after, in 2014, due to the annexation of Crimea by Russia. Lithuania, after suspending conscription in 2008 revived it in 2015 and Sweden, after suspending it in 2010, revived it in 2018. Alongside with the European states three Arab countries, including Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, have started to recruit conscripts, whereas the two latter are during it the first time. Qatar introduced conscription for male citizens in 2013, UAE in 2014 and Kuwait reintroduced compulsory military service for men in 2017 after abolishing it in 2001 (Ardemagni, 2018). There are also debates going on in Poland, Romania, the UK, Italy and in France. However, a possible return to conscription can only take place when both “military arguments as well as political idealism are taken into account (Bieri, 2015, p. 2). The majority of countries where there is no conscription in place during peace time maintain the option to reintroduce national service in case of war when mobilizing essential manpower seems impracticable by volunteers or through fiscal taxes (Poutvaara & Wagener, 2011, p. 2).

## **1.2. Impetuses for the decline of conscription**

Contemporary scholars argue that there are multiple indirect reasons for the decline of conscription. At the time when the first countries in the Western world started to abolish the draft, scholars (Janowitz, 1972; Moskos & Wood, 1988) argued that problems with conscription are the main characteristic of the decline of the mass armies and proposed four structural changes causing this change: nuclearization of defence, military intervention in other countries, change of values and priorities in postmodern societies, and the crisis in the social legitimacy of compulsory military service. Others argue the reasons behind the decline of conscription to be the change in geopolitics (Ajangiz, 2002; Bieri, 2015; Haltiner & Tresch, 2008; Jehn & Selden, 2002). These phenomena paved the way for factors that affected the decline of mass armies, including the crisis of the nation-state, which had an immediate impact on national armed forces (Ajangiz, 2002, p. 308).

The development of nuclear technology and the overall growing complexity of weapons systems paved the way for understanding that the time of large-scale wars and territorial defence is over (Ajangiz, 2002; Boene, 2009; Jehn & Selden, 2002). Furthermore,

deployment of conscripts was not practical for peacekeeping missions and external interventions that became more and more relevant over time, whereas voluntary based military units provided an opportunity to make armies more professional by increasing their general operational preparedness (Bieri, 2015, p. 2). Last but not least, enlargement of such international organizations like NATO and the European Union that entailed security guarantees, motivated member states to follow the system based on professional armies - when “national defence is planned strictly within the parameters of the alliance; large-scale conscript armies are no longer seen as necessary “(*ibid.*).

There are various socio-political reasons that have directly or indirectly affected countries’ decision to end conscription. One is the question of the justification of conscription as a citizen’s duty. Another equally important question in democratic societies is violation of freedom of individuals and selective recruitment system of military service. Last but not least the low levels of public support for conscription among young people has influenced many countries’ decision to opt for professional armies. A prominent theory of social contract which discusses the legitimacy of the authority of the state over the individual also addresses the legitimacy of conscription. Within the tradition of social contract theory, the defence of the public domain is considered as a duty of every citizen (Pemberton, 2014). While every citizen is liable to military service, in practice it is required only from men in good health, whereas some of them are spared (Thunder, 1978, p. 258). In today’s democratic societies there is a possibility to refuse from conscription for religious or ethical reasons, which is called a conscientious objection. This is a right to object military service based on article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that ensures the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief (Conscientious objection to military service, n.d.). A sharp increase in numbers for conscientious objection was a reason why some countries decided to end conscription. Italy, Spain and Germany are examples where rising numbers of conscientious objection proved that when the alternative to military service becomes more proportional, conscripts choose not to join the armed forces (Ajangiz, 2002, p. 308). In South Africa, the anti-conscription movements and protests pushed the country to abolish conscription in 1991 which also affected the policies in Argentina where compulsory military service was ended in 1994 and the same year the length of service was halved in Chile, Taiwan, Vietnam and South Korea (*ibid.*).

An equally important socio-political reason for the decline of conscription is the question of violation of freedom of individuals. Libertarians regard conscription as an unjustified norm and acceptable only if it is necessary for the defence of liberty. They see the only justified means of the use of conscription when citizens have agreed to such regulation as a righteous way of sharing the burden of national defence while making sure the risks are equally shared by all members of society, without prejudices between different classes of society among those who are called for duty (Rawls, 1999, pp. 333-334). The US is an example, as pointed out in previous chapter, where the liberal deferment regulation and use of lottery system caused a sentiment of injustice and ‘biased selectiveness’ of mandatory military service (Poutvaara & Wagener, 2011, p. 36).

Another socio-political reason that has influenced countries’ decision to opt for professional armed forces and suspend or abolish conscription is significantly low public support for conscription among young people, those in the age of recruitment. For example, in 1997, at the time when majority of European countries were seriously considering suspending or abolishing conscription, the share of young people aged 15-24 favouring conscription in the EU 15 was only 23%, while the highest support was in Greece (79%) and the lowest in the Netherlands (9%) (Manigart, *Ending the Draft: The Case of Belgium*, 2012, p. 3). The country with the second highest support towards conscription was Finland (52%), however, the country’s public opinion was already much more supportive in 2019 (77%) (Puolustusministeriö, 2020, p. 15). High public support for conscription in countries like Greece and Finland is due to their geostrategic location and higher threat perception towards Turkey and Russia, respectively.

Generational and cultural shifts within societies are indirect reasons, yet integral part of the trend where countries have decided to replace mass armies with standing armies. Generational change involves a shift in values. This shift, however, depends on the level of development of countries. Intergenerational value change takes place in societies where high levels of socioeconomic development has taken place (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, p. 95). In these societies, individualism and post-materialist values emerge (Inglehart, 2008; Inglehart & Welzel, 2010). One of the outcomes of such cultural shift is that personal interest come first and together with globalization and growing transnational nature of different type of organizations, including military, recession of

“national sentiment” occurs (Manigart, 2012, p. 3). Last but not least, abolishment of conscription was the outcome of the change in societal values that had shifted since there was no real external military threat anymore for many countries – that societal change gave politicians an opportunity to win votes by abolishing conscript service (Bieri, 2015, p. 2).

### **1.3. Reasons for retaining or reviving conscription**

In European countries where conscription has been kept in place, there is usually a high level of public support for that. For instance, in 2013 there was a referendum in Switzerland on the matter either to retain conscription or not and 73 per cent of the Swiss voting population voted for retainment of conscription (Bieri, 2015, p. 2). There has also been a strong public support for conscription in Finland where 77 per cent of the population in 2019 and 74 per cent in 2018 supported retainment of a current system that is based on men's general military service, in which as many people as possible receive military training which generates a large reserve (Puolustusministeriö, 2020, p. 14). In Estonia public support for conscription is even higher – in 2019 there was 92 per cent of the population who found conscription definitely or rather necessary, whereas it was 84 per cent in 2018 at the same time of the year (Avalik arvamus ja riigikaitse, 2019, p. 51).

There are various reasons why some European states have retained conscription and why many are considering to re-introduce it. The three main reasons are: current geopolitical situation, dynamics of military alliances and political will (Rongé & Abrate, 2019). However, for the same reasons some countries have ended conscription. The post-Cold War era when inter-state conflicts tended to decrease is over – geopolitical tensions have grown, and risk assessments have changed. For instance, due to the post-Cold War changed geopolitical situation, countries like France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Belgium decided to end conscription (Jehn & Selden, 2002, p. 7). In 2017 French president Emmanuel Macron proposed the idea to revive universal military service as part of his presidential campaign, however the complex project foresees “to urge” young men and women to join (Zaretsky, 2018) but not as a mandatory duty and therefore cannot be considered as conscription as such.

Other European countries such as the Baltic states, Ukraine and Sweden have retained or re-introduced it due to Russia's growing military activity in the region, while the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was the strongest push for Sweden, Ukraine and Lithuania for reviving their conscription service (Rongé & Abrate, 2019, p. 10). In some countries, such as France, Spain and Italy a link between populist movements and support for compulsory military service can be identified, whereas in Italy and Spain, the populists' rhetoric has followed the idea of „the need of reminding young people that apart from rights, there are also obligations to one's nation" (*Ibid.*).

#### **1.4. Public opinion and support towards conscription**

In democratic countries public opinion has a direct influence on public policy and policy makers take it into account when shaping policies. The more outstanding an issue to the public, the stronger the relationship between public opinion and its influence on policymaking (Burstein, 2003, p. 29). Public opinion also matters to decision makers, in particular before elections, when choosing a strategy for their election campaign. When creating an action plan, decision-makers estimate the degree of support not only from their colleagues and other politicians but also of the general public (Coppock, 1977, p. 137). According to Manigart (2000, p. 27) "from a normative standpoint, it is important that, in a democratic political system, the gap between political decisions and the attitudes and preferences of the public be as small as possible". This applies also to defence and security policies. In order to have a credible security and defence policy in place, on the one hand, a state has to be capable to organize and retain its military means, while on the other hand, there has to be a certain degree of acceptance of these measures by the public (*Ibid.*). Acceptance by the public is especially important in those countries where citizens have to directly participate in national defence, i.e., in case of mobilization, or if country's national security and defence capabilities are directly dependent on citizens' readiness to contribute.

Some scholars (Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995) argue that public officials consistently respond to shifts in public opinion and therefore democracy works. Others (Jones, 1994, Zaller, 1992, Arnold 1990) claim that due to the complexity of modern politics, responsiveness is problematic. There are only few issues that matter to the public



where responsiveness is likely to be high (Jones, 1994). There are issues where it should not be expected that the public has a meaningful political opinion (Burstein, 2006, Zaller, 1992) and there are issues where the level of complexity of the legislative process does not allow citizens to be sure if their interests are being served (Arnold, 1990, pp. 271-72). Security and defence policies are one of the most complex topics for the general public to have a meaningful opinion about. However, in democratic countries various surveys on security and defence matters are carried out. Public opinion is central for defence policy implementation, budget considerations, military interventions abroad, or participation in military alliances (Choulis, Bakaki, & Böhmelt, 2021, p. 241).

There has been limited research dedicated to public opinion towards conscription, whereas research on differences among various societal groups on the matter is absent. The last time when Europeans' opinion towards conscription was studied in a large-scale survey was in 1997 in the Eurobarometer Special Defence Survey when only 23 per cent of young Europeans between 15 and 24 supported compulsory military service after which it was found irrelevant enough to study in the next survey in 2001 (Manigart, 2000, pp. 36-37). Therefore, this thesis gives an overview on what has been previously studied about public opinion towards military service in general. There have been studies on how conscription affects public's support for war, how conscription influences citizens' support for the armed forces, and studies on public opinion toward the use of force (Choulis et al., 2021; Horowitz & Levendusky, 2011; Klarevas, 2002; Manigart 2000).

The aforementioned issues have been researched both in Europe and in the US, while more in-depth research specifically related to public opinion on these matters has been carried out in the US. Public opinion towards military related issues in the US is directly related to the US policymaker's indication that public support is essential for country's military operations while „the foreign policy issue to which the American public is most sensitive is the use of military force [...] because decisions regarding the use of force are some of the most important decisions the nation ever has to consider“ (Klarevas, 2002, p. 417). Public support in the US towards military related subjects is in direct correlation with elite's views on the matter. When there is consensus among the elite, public support is dynamic, and when dissensus among elite reflected in the media, public opinion is either split or not supportive, causing „polarization effect“ (Klarevas, 2002, pp. 425, 432).

Examples of this kind of polarizations can be found in the Vietnam and Gulf Wars as well as in the Lebanon, Somalia, Rwanda, and Haiti peace operations (Klarevas, 2002, p. 432). Authors who have studied how conscription affects public support for war in the US, argue that compulsory military service decreases mass support for war, mainly caused by concerns of self-interests (Horowitz & Levendusky, 2011, p. 525). Self-interest is a driving force of citizen's behaviour when they have 'skin in the game' and have to think about their personal costs and benefits (Chong, Citrin, & Conley, 2001, p. 541). One of the examples that has been studied is the Vietnam War where self-interest in the form of the draft lottery system had a significant impact on public's attitude toward the war (Horowitz & Levendusky, 2011, p. 526). Horowitz and Levendusky (2011) analysed the attitudes of the US male citizens who were eligible for draft during the Vietnam War and concluded that those who were more likely to be drafted, based on the lottery system used, were "more likely to strongly oppose the Vietnam War" (p. 527). A more recent study on public support to mandatory military service concluded that setting of the war on terrorism patriotic duty and issues related with social equity are likely to become topical once again (Simon & Lovrich, 2009).

There is also literature reflecting differences in attitudes toward military service among minorities in the US. Mandatory military service has been compared to "institutional racism" (Murray, 1971, p. 57) referring to the impact on African Americans in particular. There is some evidence of positive improvements regarding socio-political gains for minorities in the US during the past decades where both Hispanic as well as African Americans career advancement can be well-demonstrated in the US Army compared to other sectors (Simon & Lovrich, 2009, p. 371). The same improvement does not account for gay-minorities in the US military – bravery and excellence during their service has improved their ranking only in few cases (Kier, 1998). A large proportion of Vietnam-era draft evaders were minorities (Curry, 1985). This might be due to the "unfair burden being placed on the least privileged in the US society at the time" (Simon & Lovrich, 2009).

In Europe, scholars have researched the relation of public opinion and conscription from a different aspect. A recent comprehensive study by Choulis, Bakaki and Böhmelt (2021) analysed how conscription influences citizens' support for the armed forces in 34

countries in Europe from 1997 to 2017. The study suggests that “conscription is more likely than voluntary-recruitment systems to reach out to and socialize larger segments of the society in line with the military’s values“ and argues that conscription affects the way society sees the armed forces and interacts with it, which in turn has an impact on the implementation of defence policies (*Ibid.*). Another topic closely related to the military that has been studied in Europe is about public opinion on European Defence and Security Policy. Support for common security and defence policy is very high among Europeans, whereas there has been consistently more than 70% of citizens favouring common defence and security policy among EU member states between 2004 and 2017 (European Commission, 2017). While the Eurobarometer Special Defence Survey (*Ibid.*) identified that on the matter of common European Security and Defence Policy the majority of Europeans are not keen on the idea of a really integrated defence policy, some authors (Schilde, Anderson, & Garner, 2019) have argued that Europeans are supportive towards European defence integration. The opinion of European general public is often “in close correlation with those of the respective governments” and leads to a question “is it public opinion which influences the national governments’ positions or the other way round“ (Manigart, 2000, p. 46).

Since majority of the countries where conscription was still in place during the Cold War have suspended or abolished compulsory military service since 2000s, no large-scale public opinion surveys have been carried out on the matter. Furthermore, as already outlined, there has been limited research dedicated to public opinion towards conscription. Trustworthy research results on why people support or do not support conscription are absent. Based on the existing literature related to the topic, it is known that there are some countries in Europe where public support for national defence is higher and where issues related to conscripts have been researched more in-depth. For example, there is an unusually high public support for national defence efforts among Nordic-Baltic states (Järvenpää, 2016, p. 14). Estonia and Finland are one of the few countries where continuous studies on public opinion and national defence have been carried out, where general public’s opinion is being asked about various defence and

security matters, including support for conscription.<sup>2</sup> While the support for conscription among the general public of both countries is high (Järvenpää, 2016; Kivirähk, 2009), there are problems seen from the conscripts' perspective. For example, an interview-based research carried out in Finland in 2017<sup>3</sup> identified issues related to conscription, including "inequality of the conscription system, obligation to serve and lack of discretion [...] the problem of killing has special weight when they reflect upon their [conscripts'] own role in the possible act of war" (Kosonen, Puustinen, & Tallberg, 2019, p. 55). A similar research was carried out in Estonia in 2016-2017<sup>4</sup> that analysed the fears conscripts have during their conscription period and identified that „the predominant fears that young men experience during their conscription period are connected to a loss of agency and status but also being away from their loved ones and not being able to continue with the plans for their life“ (Truusa & Talves, 2018, pp. 170, 178).

Since there is no reliable existing literature on differences among societal groups in attitudes towards conscription and why they exist, this thesis turns to general theories of human behaviour for insight. From rational choice theory perspective, citizens are self-interested actors who seek to maximize utility and minimize costs. Conscription situates selected citizens – usually young men – „in a strong obligatory and power relationship with the state“ where the citizen „makes personal sacrifices on behalf of the state and the nation (Kosonen, Puustinen, & Tallberg, 2019, p. 55). A precondition of a rational choice theory is that people rank their preferences and when making a choice, each one of them will try to maximize their preferences (Andersen, 2009). Based on the rational decision-making logic, a person will choose amongst all feasible options the alternative that the person most prefers (Amadae & Rogers, 2016). While being motivated by the desires and objectives that represent their preferences, individuals take action within given limitations as well as based on the information they have regarding the circumstances under which they have to act (Scott, 2000, p. 127). Overall, a rational choice perspective would lead

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<sup>2</sup> Sweden carried out a public survey in 2016 in order to identify public opinion on the question of reintroduction of conscription which was suspended in 2010, more than 70 percent of the respondents supported the plan ("Majority of Swedes", 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The interviews were carried out among conscripts who were liable for non-military service and the persons who had completed conscript service and had applied for transfer to non-military service (Kosonen, Puustinen, & Tallberg, 2019, p. 50).

<sup>4</sup> The paper used the data collected in 2016–2017 in the conscript survey of the Estonian Defence Forces human resources research project (Truusa & Talves, 2018, p. 178).

us to expect that people who have 'skin in the game' – i.e., are expected to serve in the army – are less supportive of conscription than people who do not have to contribute. In contrast, a constructivist approach – which emphasizes the centrality of ideas, identities, values and norms – would explain differential support to conscription with factors related to national identity and values such as patriotism. Thus, those with a strong sense of national identity and strong patriotic values would be expected to be more supportive of conscription than others.

## **1.5. Hypotheses**

Based on the preceding discussion, this study postulates the following expectations about support for conscription among residents of Estonia:

- 1) Conscripts consider conscription service to be less important than the general population of Estonia.
- 2) Younger population consider conscription service to be less important than the older generation in Estonia.
- 3) Residents whose main language of communication is not Estonian consider conscription service to be less important than those whose language of communication is Estonian.
- 4) The willingness to serve in the army of those conscripts whose language of communication is Russian has decreased after international crises involving the Russian Federation and/or Russian-speaking minorities.

## **2. CASE SELECTION, METHODS AND DATA**

The second chapter provides an overview of conscription in Estonia as a case for this study. It explains the methods and data used and defines the independent and dependent variables. In order to map trends in Estonia's public support to conscription over the period from 2005 to 2019 and across different social groups, the thesis uses survey data from three survey studies commissioned by the Estonian Ministry of Defence, Estonian Defence Resources Agency and Centre of Excellence for Strategic Sustainability. The samples and variables of these surveys are described. For explaining variations among different social groups towards conscription service, the thesis uses data from nine expert interviews. The methods and data of these interviews are described in this chapter.

### **2.1. Case selection**

#### **2.1.1. Background**

Security of small countries depends very much on the global geopolitical situation. Both small in its land size as well as the number of inhabitants, Estonia has a population of only 1.3 million people.<sup>5</sup> Located in North Eastern Europe, bordering with the Baltic Sea from the West and with Russia from the East, and considering its history with the latter, Estonia is a geopolitical hotspot where a strong national defence system that includes supportive civil-military relations is vital. After restoring its independence in 1991 amidst the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia started to rebuild its army forces from zero. Estonia's national defence strategy has been to train reserve units over the course of conscription and reserve exercises. In 2004 Estonia became a member of NATO as well as the EU, and the country's contribution to international missions has increased significantly since then. At the time of geostrategic power struggle between major powers, Estonia as a frontline state must make sure it has a strong consensual defence posture supported by both military and civilians. Estonia is an interesting case even among the other Baltic states because even after joining NATO in 2004 and after building its army from scratch as did Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia was the only among all three Baltic states that decided to retain conscription.

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<sup>5</sup> 1,324,820 people living in Estonia as of 1 Jan 2019 (Population based on nationality 2019).

### **2.1.2. Re-establishment of armed forces**

After restoring its independence, the young democratic country had no defence capacity, defence forces or ability to contribute to international defence cooperation. Estonia had to build its national defence and armed forces from zero, which according to some authors gave the country an advantage “since retraining and reorganizing an existing system is usually more difficult” (Lill, 2014, lk 175). Nevertheless, there was a lack of all kind of resources for reconstructing the Defence Forces, including, first and foremost, financial resources, as well as competent personnel, equipment, armament, infrastructure and technology. The military elite supported the idea to involve all military specialists with Estonian origin regardless of the country where they had their military training while the main conditions were loyalty to the Estonian state, motivation to serve its people and the country as well as their professional competence (Laaneots, 2017).

The government of the new Republic issued a decree on 18 March 1992 about the creation of Kalev and Kuperjanov infantry battalions which marked the beginning of reconstruction of Estonian Defence Forces (*Ibid.*). A vital part in the country’s defence system is its paramilitary force – Defence League – which was re-established already the year before and was officially included in the composition of Estonia’s armed forces with the government’s decision of 28 April 1992 (*Ibid.*). Both the Defence Forces and the Defence League were first established during the first Republic between the World Wars and ceased to exist when the Republic was liquidated at the beginning of the Soviet Occupation in 1940. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (1992) “citizens of Estonia have a duty to participate in national defence in accordance with the principles and procedure provided by the law”. The aim of Estonia’s first post-war constitutional government was to integrate the country into the West as fast and firmly as possible.

One of the preconditions for the success was the adoption of Western-minded national defence concept (Rebas, 2014, p. 218). One of the key features of Western defence system is professionalization of the military. This feature was not an official precondition of joining NATO, however, all of the CEE countries either suspended or abolished conscription between the years 2003-2010 while Estonia remained the only one among the CEE countries that kept compulsory military service which is present until today. The

approval rate of conscription increased in 2008 when a war broke out between Russia and Georgia (Avalik arvamus ja riigikaitse, 2005-2019). Also, a political debate over mandatory military service which had been taken place for a few years prior ended as a result of the Russo-Georgian war ("Reinsalu: Gruusia sõda", 2013). There has been a political consensus over the conscription in principle ever since, while the debate circles rather around the numbers of defence budget.

### **2.1.3. Conscription in Estonia**

Today, Estonia's defence policy and military strategy are based on a principle that at the same time when the country is dependent on its allies and is therefore contributing to the alliance, it must have a primary capability to defend itself. Estonia's defence policy is grounded on initial individual defence system and NATO's collective defence based on six pillars: military defence, civilian support for military defence, international action, domestic and internal security, maintenance of the continuous operation of the state and society, and psychological defence (National Security Concept, 2017, p. 3). While the 2017 National Security Concept formulates a greater role of the civil society in national defence than the previous one from 2010 did, compulsory military service is still kept as the principal tool of manning reserve units in order to secure the country's independent capability of maintaining a standing army. The National Security Concept of Estonia foresees that "compulsory conscription is maintained as the main way of manning reserve units and as a pool for recruiting active-duty personnel ", while training is organised throughout the year for civil society in order to constantly increase the number of individuals who have passed the military training (National Security Concept, 2017, p. 11). One very specific way of military training for civil society is the Estonian National Defence Course (ENDC) that was initiated in 1999, following the example of Finland, and has taken place twice a year ever since (Kõrgemad Riigikaitse Kursused, n.d.).

The structure of the Estonian Defence Forces is based on the principle of a reserve force, meaning that the main element of the country's defence forces are units in the reserve, seen as the best option for a country with limited resources (Reserv, 2021). Thanks to its reserve army Estonia as a country with 1.3 million people is able to mobilise around 26 000 soldiers during war time. During peacetime the state does not have any other commitment than training of reservist and procurement of their equipment and weapons.



After conscription reservists are called up for trainings under staff command in every five years which involve reinforcement of competences they have already acquired and practice of action of reserve companies and battalions in situations similar to those of a real battle (*Ibid.*). The National Security Concept foresees more reservist trainings and additional short-notice reservist trainings on regular basis with an up-to-date assessment system (National Security Concept, 2017, p. 12).

In addition to reservists, the Voluntary Defence League has approximately 13 000 members and the planned size of the operational (wartime) structure is 16 000 personnel (Defence and Armed Forces, 2016)(Ministry of Defence, 2016).

The Military Service Act of Republic of Estonia § 5 (2) (Kaiteväeteenistuse seadus, 2013) defines *conscript service* as:

the performance of the mandatory duty to serve in the Defence Forces of a male person liable to national defence obligation and the voluntary entering military service of a female person, and the completion thereof with the purpose to acquire military training.

A *conscript* is a person in conscript service (*Ibid.*). According to the Act (§ 2. (3)) a *call-up selectee* is „male person between the ages of 17 and 27 (inclusive) until entering conscript service or alternative service<sup>6</sup> or until release from conscript service or alternative service“. A *person in reserve* is „a person liable to national defence obligation, who is not a call-up selectee nor serves in the alternative or military service (*Ibid.*, § 2. (4)).

The duration of conscript service in Estonia is usually either eight months or 11 months but not longer than 12 months or shorter than eight months (*Ibid.*, § 46. (1)). Conscripts entering the service in July will serve for 11 months i.e., until May and those who enter the service in October, will also serve until May but the length of the service is eight months. The full length of the service is „dependent upon the armed service, the tasks assigned to the structural unit engaged in training of conscripts and the nature of military training“ (*Ibid.*). 11-month conscription usually begins in January or July and applies for conscripts who either undergo military service in the Navy; undergo non-commissioned

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<sup>6</sup> Alternative service is a compulsory national defence training of a person liable to national defence obligation who refuses military service for religious or ethical reasons (Military Service Act 2013, § 4).

officer, military police or communication or information technology training; acquires the right to drive a motor vehicle in military service or performs the duties of a motor vehicle driver. The 8-month conscript service trains the unit's line-up and generally begins in October. Conscripts trained in the 11-month and 8-month conscripts will eventually form a single unit. (Ajateenistusest, 2020)

During the first 12 weeks Soldier's Basic Course (SBC) takes place where conscripts learn about arms, orientating and first aid, attain skills for forest camps, knowledge about the basics of tactics, behaviour in the Defence Forces and legislation. This 'basic knowledge' is then tested with both theoretical and practical soldier's exam. After the SBC a Soldier's Specialty Basic Course (SSBC) takes place which lasts for 6 weeks and gives conscripts knowledge and skills useful for specialists such as riflemen, machine gunners, anti-tank grenade launchers, drivers, paramedics, etc. (Reserv, 2021). Unit course (UC) teaches co-operation as a member of a squad, platoon, company and battalion and lasts for 17 weeks (*Ibid.*).

#### **2.1.4. Attitudes regarding conscription in Estonia**

Relations between civilians and the military organizations in Estonia have been deeply affected by the Soviet occupation that lasted for half a century until 1991. During the occupation almost every young man in the Soviet Union had to serve in the army. Estonians' – the soldiers, their families, friends and overall society's – perceptions about the Soviet army were strongly negative. These negative perceptions were inherited by the new Republic of Estonia and during the first years of independence it was very difficult to inspire young men to join the army. There was a lack of willingness within Estonian society to create its own armed forces while most of the Estonian "intelligence" was left out of the process of recreation of the army (Laaneots, 2017).

Another important change that Estonia inherited from the Soviet occupation is the presence of a large Russian-speaking minority. As a heterogenous society with more than a quarter<sup>7</sup> of its population formed by Russian-speaking minorities, its geographic and geopolitical locus make civil-military relations quite unique among other NATO

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<sup>7</sup> 24.8% of country's total population as of 1 Jan 2019 (Population growth caused by increase 2019).

countries<sup>8</sup>. This ethnic segmentation of a small population causes cleavages in many different ways, including attitudes towards country's compulsory military service and willingness to serve, as well as views on both domestic and foreign policy.

Cleavages among different societal groups regarding the matter of conscription is important for Estonia because it has a small population, defence resources are scarce, and it needs the civilian population to be united with the military for its total defence system to work effectively. Pressure for this is considerable because of the country's challenging geostrategic position.

## **2.2. Survey data**

Quantitative data for this thesis has been extracted from three surveys. The first survey – “Public opinion and national defence” has been conducted by the Social and Market Research Companies Turu-uuringute AS and Saar ja Poll OÜ upon the order of the Estonian Ministry of Defence each year since 2001. Although, there has been some irregularity<sup>9</sup> with the survey, it has usually been conducted twice a year, in March and in October. Data on the general population's attitude regarding conscription service has been extracted for the years 2005-2019 because respondents' attitude regarding conscription service has been measured since 2005. The objective of the public opinion survey is to understand citizens' attitude regarding national defence issues (Avalik arvamus ja riigikaitse, 2005-2019). Among the other issues the survey addresses general population's attitude regarding compulsory conscription service for men (Arvamused Eesti Kaitseväest enne ja pärast ajateenistust, 2007-2016). Omnibus 1000 environment was used to carry out the survey – a survey with a usual sample of 1,000 respondents is held on regular basis and the sample includes the citizens of the Republic of Estonia with the age above 15. Since October 2011 an additional sample of 200 respondents has been added in order to assure a better representation of the Russian-speaking population in the sample. The sample information of the survey can be found in Appendix 5. The so-called principle of the young man was applied to the selection of respondents at the source

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<sup>8</sup> The only country with similar ethnically segregated society is Latvia. However, Latvia abolished conscription in 2007 which makes its civil-military relations profile different from Estonia.

<sup>9</sup> – In some years the survey was conducted thrice a year and, in some years, only once.

address. This means that at the address of the sample, the interview will be performed with the household's youngest male member in the age above 15 who is present at home (Avalik arvamus ja riigikaitse, 2005-2019).

The data on attitudes regarding conscription service among conscripts and reservists has been extracted from two different surveys in order to cover a suitable timeline as well as for the reason that the conductor of the survey changed. The data for the years 2007-2015<sup>10</sup> has been taken from the survey "Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription", ordered by the Defence Resources Agency and conducted by the International Centre for Defence and Security (from 2007 until 2013) and the Social and Market Research Company Turu-uuringute AS (from 2014 to 2016) (Arvamus Eesti Kaitseväest enne ja pärast ajateenistust, 2007-2016). Data for the years 2016-2018 has been extracted from the research by the Centre of Excellence for Strategic Sustainability survey "Problematic Relations During Conscription: Results of the Conscripts' Survey 2016-2018" (the report is not public; I am using selected data from this survey based on written official permission by the Estonian National Defence College). The methodology of those two surveys was slightly different. This concerns the sampling method and the interview mode that was used as well as the time of the surveys. The Social and Market Research Company Turu-uuringute AS used a postal survey for the years 2007-2015, whereas in 2015 the survey was also translated in Russian language. Research by Centre of Excellence for Strategic Sustainability survey was conducted at the military base during the first and the last month of the respondents' service time. However, the questions regarding the conscripts and reservists' attitudes regarding conscription were very similar or the same which gives an opportunity to use the data as a whole for the purposes of this thesis. The sample size of the two surveys on attitudes regarding conscription service among conscripts and reservists is rather similar. In the survey "Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription" the number of respondents among conscripts' range between the lowest 1001 in 2014 and the highest 1253 in 2008 (Appendix 6). The number of respondents among reservists' range between

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<sup>10</sup> The Social and Market Research Company Turu-uuringute AS survey "Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription" was conducted until 2016, however, since the Research by Centre of Excellence for Strategic Sustainability survey started to carry out their surveys also in 2016 and the method that was used was more personal approach, the latter one's data for the year 2016 has been used in this thesis.

the lowest 401 in 2011 and the highest 669 in 2007. There were usually 3000 questionnaires sent out to conscripts and 2500 to reservists each year. The response rate among conscripts varied from 33% to 42% while it was lower among reservists with 41% the highest and 17% the lowest.

**Dependent variable.** The dependent variable is the attitude towards conscription which has been identified based on the questions asked in the surveys. The survey “Public Opinion and National Defence” has studied general population’s attitude towards the necessity of conscript service where the following answer options were provided: a) certainly necessary, b) rather necessary, c) don’t know, d) rather unnecessary, e) completely unnecessary (Figures 1-5).

In the survey “Opinions regarding Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription” the respondents were also asked about their attitude towards the necessity of conscription, whereas a comparison with the general population attitudes was reflected. Additionally, the same survey studied respondents’ willingness to go to the army with the question “with what feelings are you going/went to military service?” where respondents had the following answer options: a) I expressed my own will, b) I was glad to go, c) I was ready to do my duty, d) If there was a possibility, I would have not gone, e) I came completely against my own will, or f) hard to say (Figure 6).

**Independent variables.** There are three independent variables observed in this thesis: age, language of communication and respondent’s relationship with conscription.

**Age.** Age as an independent variable is identified differently in all surveys used for quantitative data of this thesis. In the survey “Public Opinion and National Defence” there are six age categories defined: 15–19-year-olds, 20–29-year-olds, 30–39-year-olds, 40–49-year-olds, 50–59-year-olds, 60–74-year-olds. The survey “Opinions regarding Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription” by Defence Resources Agency identifies five different age categories as following: 18–19-year-olds, 20-year-olds, 21-year-olds, 22-year-olds and 23+ year-olds. Data is not available for the age categories in the survey about opinions regarding defence forces before and after conscription by Centre of Excellence for Strategic Sustainability.

**Language of communication.** There is a common differentiation of the language of communication as an independent variable throughout the surveys. Overall, two different languages are identified as the main language of communication of the respondents – Estonian and Russian. However, while in the surveys about opinions regarding defence forces before and after conscription, Russian and Estonian are identified as the only languages of communication throughout the surveys, there is certain inconsistency in the survey “public Opinion and National Defence”. The term ‘other’ is used instead of ‘Russian’ when presenting the results, however, within the text ‘Russian-speakers’ and ‘Estonian-speakers’ are commonly used. Therefore, this thesis relies on two types of languages of communication, which are Estonian and Russian, respectively.

**Relationship with conscription.** The data of the survey “Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription” has been collected in parallel among two different type of respondents – reservists and conscripts. Respondents’ group ‘reservists’ has been identified as the young men who had already finished their conscript service and accounted to the reserve forces by the time of the survey took place, in springtime the same year the survey took place (the survey lasted between June and September from 2007 until 2015). Respondents’ group ‘conscripts’ has been identified as the young men called up for military service either in July or October the same year the survey took place. Respondents’ relationship with conscription in the survey “Problematic Relations During Conscription: Results of the Conscripts’ Survey 2016-2018” has been identified the same as for the survey “Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription”. In the survey “Public Opinion and National Defence” respondents’ relationship with conscription has not been identified.

### **2.3. Interview data**

The qualitative data of the thesis is based on nine structured expert interviews with Estonian think tank experts, civil servants and former high-ranking military officials (Appendix 1). Respondents were chosen based on their knowledge and experience of the given research topic, as well as their availability. The interviews were carried out over the course of April 2020 and due to pandemic Covid-19 it was impossible to conduct face-to-face interviews which under normal circumstances would have been a first choice

to conduct the expert interviews. Therefore, audio and written interviews were carried out instead. Eight out of nine interviews were conducted as audio interviews – two of which were carried out via Skype and six via phone. One interview took place via e-mail upon the respondent's request. The audio interviews lasted between 14-40 minutes.

The interviews were carried out based on the principles of academic ethics. Firstly, all the interviewees received an informed consent form prior to the interview in which they were offered confidentiality if they wished so (Appendix 2). The form also included the clause of the personal data protection. All interviewees gave a written consent for the interviews. Eight out of nine interviewees agreed that their names will be used in this thesis, one respondent wished to remain anonymous. However, for the purpose of presenting the results of the interviews as neutrally as possible, all interviewees have been cited as Respondent 1, 2 etc. For each interview, an interview guide was used (Appendix 3)<sup>11</sup>. For each audio interview, audio-recording was used, data collected was transcribed and both the audio recording as well as the transcriptions were encrypted. Since all the interviewees' mother tongue is Estonian, all interviews were carried out in Estonian, also, the informed consent form was distributed in Estonian.

## **2.4. Methods**

A single case study with multimethod design is used for carrying out the research. In order to identify the causes and effects of the societal gaps in attitudes regarding conscription in Estonia both quantitative and qualitative research method was used. A multimethod design is a research design “where both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used, but they remain relatively independent until the interpretation stage” (Niglas, 2004, p. 11). For the identification of the societal gaps in attitudes regarding conscription quantitative data from three survey research was used. In order to detect the causes of the results of the aforementioned three surveys semi-structured expert interviews were carried out, a qualitative data was generated. The sampling strategy used was purposive strategy, more precisely expert sampling.

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<sup>11</sup> Since all the interviews were carried out in Estonian, the interview guide is in Estonian language.

#### **2.4.1. Method of analysis**

For analysing quantitative data, conventional techniques of statistical analysis were used. For analysing qualitative interview data, data-driven thematic content analysis was used. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method that offers flexibility when analysing abundant and specific, yet complex qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). One of the biggest assets of thematic analysis when operating with verbal data, such as interviews, is its flexibility which was substantial also for analysing data of this thesis. For the purpose of conducting thematic content analysis, a step-by-step guide by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) was followed.

The first step was to familiarize myself with the data which includes a lot of reading, transcribing verbal data gathered from the interviews, taking notes and marking ideas. The second step was to generate codes that involved the production of initial codes from the data. The third step entailed searching for themes, meaning separating various codes into feasible themes, and comparing all the relevant coded data extracts within the themes identified. For identifying the themes, an inductive approach, where the themes identified are connected to the data themselves, was used which is common for a data-driven thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). In order to better follow up with the data extracted and the codes generated an excel table was compiled. Fourth step was reviewing themes which was divided in two levels. The first level was refinement themes at the level of coded data extracts: reading the collated extracts, making sure the themes fit or fixing them if necessary. The second level involved examining themes of the entire data set: re-reading the entire dataset and coding additional data that was missed previous coding stages. The fifth step involved defining and naming the themes, meaning that it was identified what aspect of the data was captured by each theme. The sixth as well as the last step was composing thematic coding table (Appendix 4) where the main results together with the most important themes and extracts from the interviews were added, and a formulation of an argument in relation to the research questions.



### **3. FINDINGS: SOCIETAL GAPS IN ATTITUDES REGARDING CONSCRIPTION**

The first subchapter gives an overview of the results of surveys conducted regarding the attitude towards conscription service in Estonia. Results from three survey research have been combined in order to depict the differences among different societal groups. Data on conscripts' and reservists' opinions about conscription has been extracted in a combination of two surveys. The following subchapters outline the results of nine expert interviews, where qualitative data was generated, in order to find possible reasons why the differences exist between those different societal groups.

#### **3.1. Overview of the public surveys results 2007-2018**

There are three different surveys that have been conducted in Estonia in order to measure attitudes regarding conscription service. Since the surveys have been conducted in different years, a common timeline has been extracted from the surveys for the purposes of this thesis. The first survey – “Public opinion and national defence” – measures the opinion about conscript service of Estonian population as a whole. The second and the third survey – “Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription” and “Problematic Relations During Conscription: Results of the Conscripts' Survey 2016-2018” – surveyed the attitudes regarding compulsory military service by the conscripts (those who were still on active duty at the time of the survey) and reservists (those who had just finished their service one or two months before the survey was conducted) themselves.

##### **3.1.1. Comparing conscripts and the general public**

According to the survey “Public opinion and national defence,” the general population in Estonia has been strongly in favour of compulsory conscript service for young men ever since the question was included in the survey since 2005<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, people's standpoint on whether the country should opt for professional army or continue with a combined system with compulsory military service together with a professional army has

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<sup>12</sup> The survey “Public opinion and national defence” has been conducted since 2001, however, the question about population's attitude regarding conscription was added in 2005.

been favouring towards the latter<sup>13</sup>. Estonian population's strong support towards conscription service is depicted in Figure 1. Those who find conscription definitely or rather necessary among overall society has ranged between the lowest 85% in the second half of 2007 and 95% in the first half of 2013.

The attitude regarding compulsory military service is not as supportive among conscripts themselves. Comparing with the support to the conscript system among overall society, conscripts' support both before and after conscription is much lower – with a difference of up to 31% – while the lowest support is among those who have just started or are about to start serving their duty, as depicted on Figure 2. In 2007, the first year of the survey was conducted among the conscripts, the share of those who had just started their service and found compulsory military service definitely or rather necessary was 69%. It then started to gradually rise and peaked in 2010 when 78% of respondents before or in the beginning of their service supported conscription. The support among beginning conscripts started to decrease in 2015 and fell down to 54% in 2018, whereas only 14% found conscription definitely necessary. Favouring position towards conscription service has also been lower in 2017 and 2018 among the respondents after or at the end of conscription where only 20% and 18% found conscription definitely necessary accordingly (Figure 2). In general, attitude regarding compulsory military service among conscripts has been slightly more supportive at the end rather than in the beginning of their service.

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<sup>13</sup> In February 2003, 60% of the respondents supported remaining compulsory military service and 29% favoured professional army, whereas there were almost twice as much favouring professional army among non-Estonian respondents. In October 2004, 50% favoured maintaining of the compulsory military service, professional army was supported by 43%. In 2008 already 75% supported maintaining conscription and in 2019 the supporters share had risen up to 78%. (Avalik arvamus ja riigikaitse, 2003, 2004, 2008, 2019)

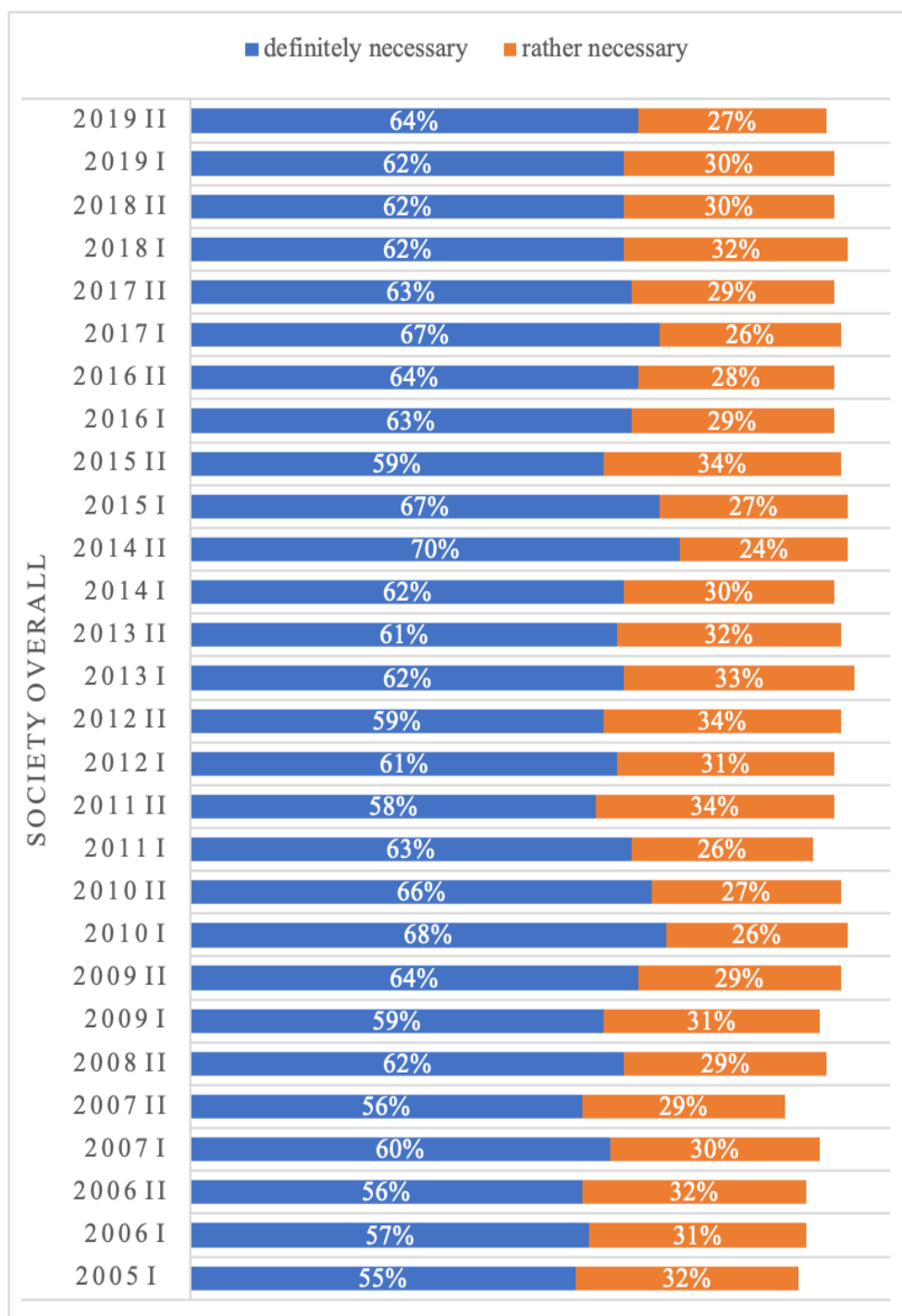


Figure 1. Attitudes regarding conscription: general public 2005-2019.

Source: Avalik arvamus ja riigikaitse, 2005-2019

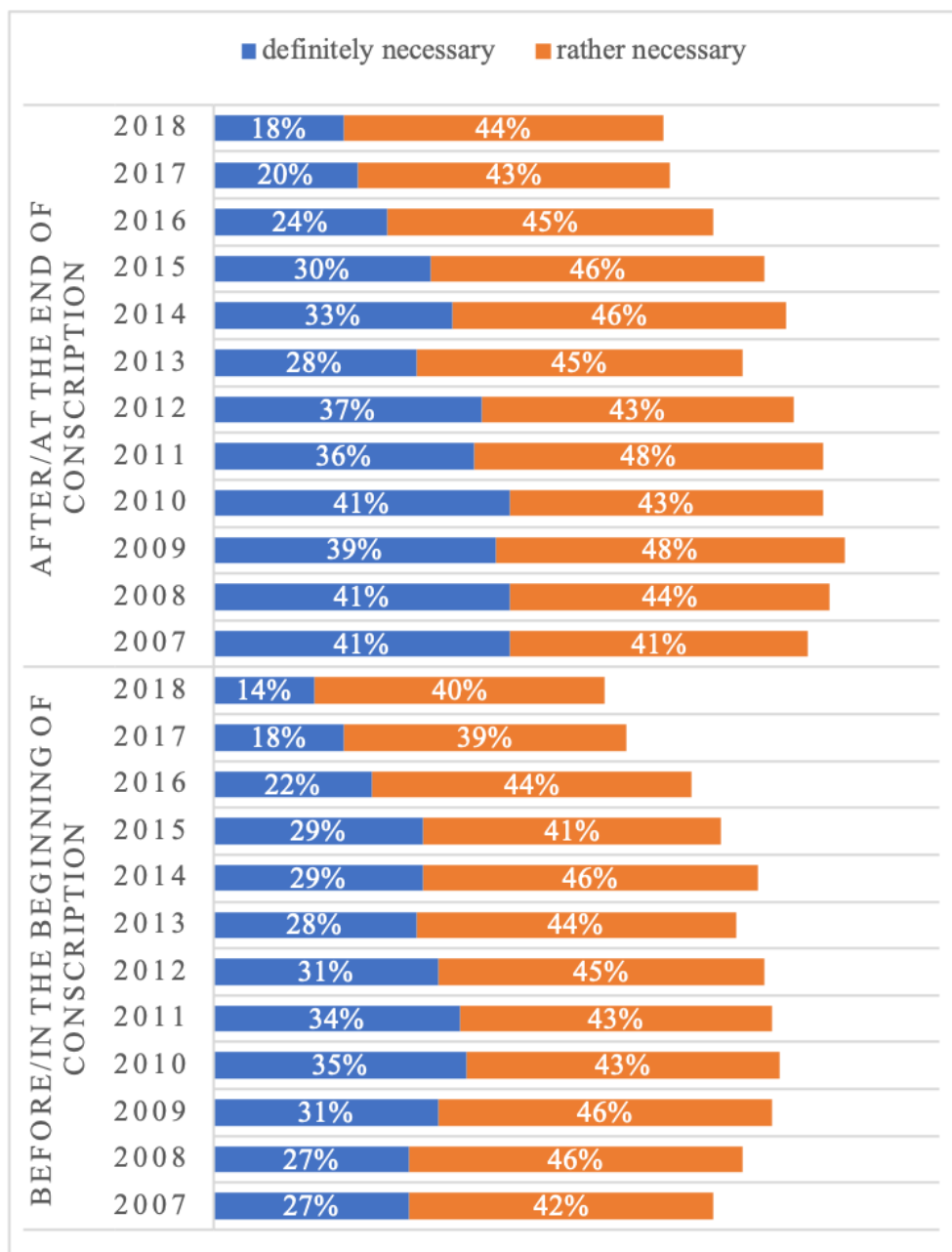


Figure 2. Attitudes regarding conscription: conscripts before and after conscription 2007-2018.

Sources: Arvamused Eesti Kaitseväest enne ja pärast ajateenistust, 2007-2016; Problematic Relations During Conscription: Results of the Conscripts' Survey 2016-2018

### **3.1.2. Variation across age groups**

Figure 3 and 4 show differences across age groups towards compulsory military service in Estonia. Figure 3 depicts those who find it definitely necessary and Figure 4 combination of those who find it either definitely or rather necessary. As it can be seen from the figures, respondents between the age of 15 and 29 are least supportive towards conscription service necessity. There are bigger differences by year among those who find conscription definitely necessary, while the difference is more than 40% at times as it was in the second half of 2019 survey when only 32% of the 15–19-year-old respondents found conscription necessary, whereas among the age groups 50-59- and 60–74-year-olds it was 75%. Another similar example is the second half of 2007 when only 33% of 15-19-year-olds found conscription definitely necessary, whereas at the same time there were 72% of 60-74-year-olds who thought the same. Another time was the second half of 2011 when those 15-19-year-old respondents who find conscription definitely necessary was less than 40%. There have been only four times when the share of the eldest respondents who find conscription definitely necessary has been less than 70% – first half of 2005, first half of 2006, first half of 2012 and first half of 2013.

When looking at the combined results of those respondents who find conscription service definitely necessary with those who find it rather necessary, the overall picture is much more even than with the results of the respondents who evaluate conscription definitely necessary (Figure 4). It is still clear that the supportive attitude regarding conscription is lower among younger generation, however, there are only few years when 15-19- and 20-29-year-old respondents' support drops below 80%. Two years can be distinguished when the support of the youngest respondents' group dropped significantly comparing to other age groups – second half of 2007 and first half of 2016.

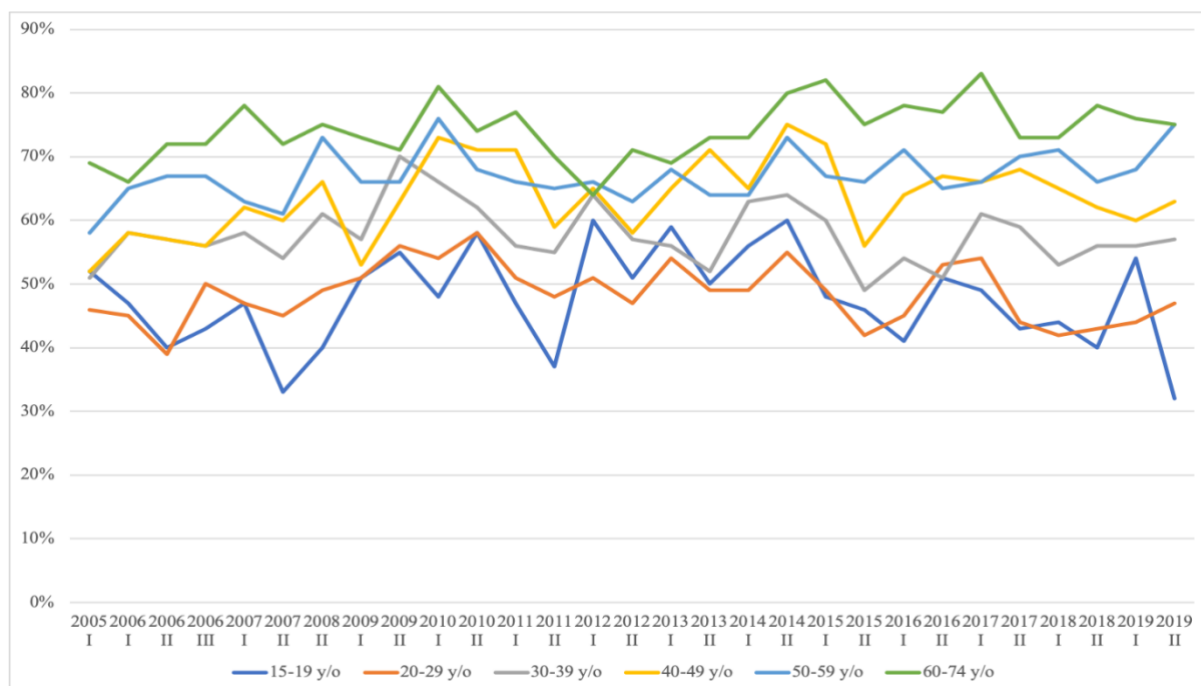


Figure 3. Attitude regarding conscription (those who find it definitely necessary): based on recipients' age group 2005-2019.

Source: Avalik arvamus ja riigikaitse, 2005-2019

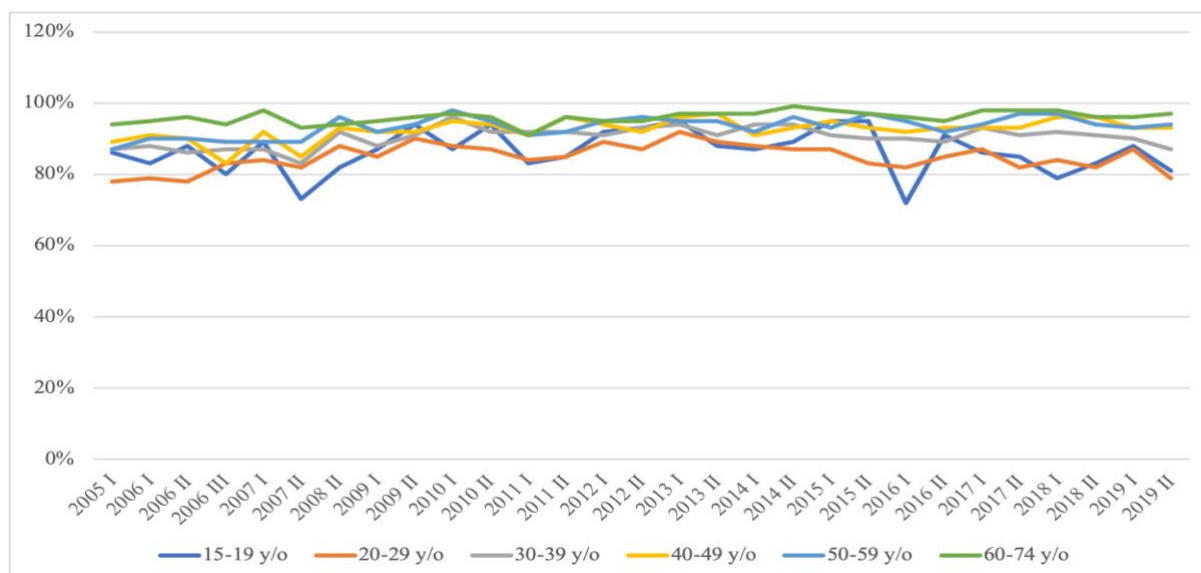


Figure 4. Attitude regarding conscription (those who find it definitely or rather necessary): based on recipients' age group 2005-2019.

Source: Avalik arvamus ja riigikaitse, 2005-2019

### **3.1.3. Variation across the language of communication**

Attitude regarding conscription service based on respondents' main language of communication has been measured since 2006. Comparison of the attitudes among Estonian-speaking population and Russian-speaking population regarding conscription is depicted in Figure 5. In order to get a better understanding of the differences between two groups of respondents' attitudes regarding conscription, one must look at two different type of results – firstly, the combination of those who find it 'definitely necessary' or 'rather necessary' and then separately only those who find it 'definitely necessary'. The stacked bar in Figure 5 shows that there have been clearly more Estonian-speaking respondents who find conscription definitely necessary, whereas the share of Russian-speaking respondents who find conscription definitely necessary is similar to those who find conscription rather necessary.

The difference among Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking population has been stable while ranging between 5-18%. The average difference between a combination of those who find conscription definitely or rather necessary is 8% i.e., on average, support among Estonians is 8 percentage points higher than among Russian speakers. The share of Estonian-speaking respondents who favour conscription has been more than 90% throughout the years and was below that only in the second half of 2006– 88% at the time, including those who find it definitely or rather necessary. The lowest support to compulsory military service among Russian-speaking population was in the second half of 2007 – 73% including those who find it definitely or rather necessary – the only time when the support dropped below 80% among Russian-speakers.

The average difference between Estonian and Russian-speaking respondents in finding conscription to be definitely necessary has been 20 percentage points on average. Throughout the years, more than 60% of Estonian-speaking respondents have found conscription service 'definitely necessary' (it was lower only once, in the second half of 2006). The share of those Russian speakers who find conscription service definitely necessary has been mostly fluctuating between 40-50%, whereas support has dropped below 40% three times: in the second half of 2011 (39%), in the first half of 2012 (39%) and in the second half of 2013 (37%).

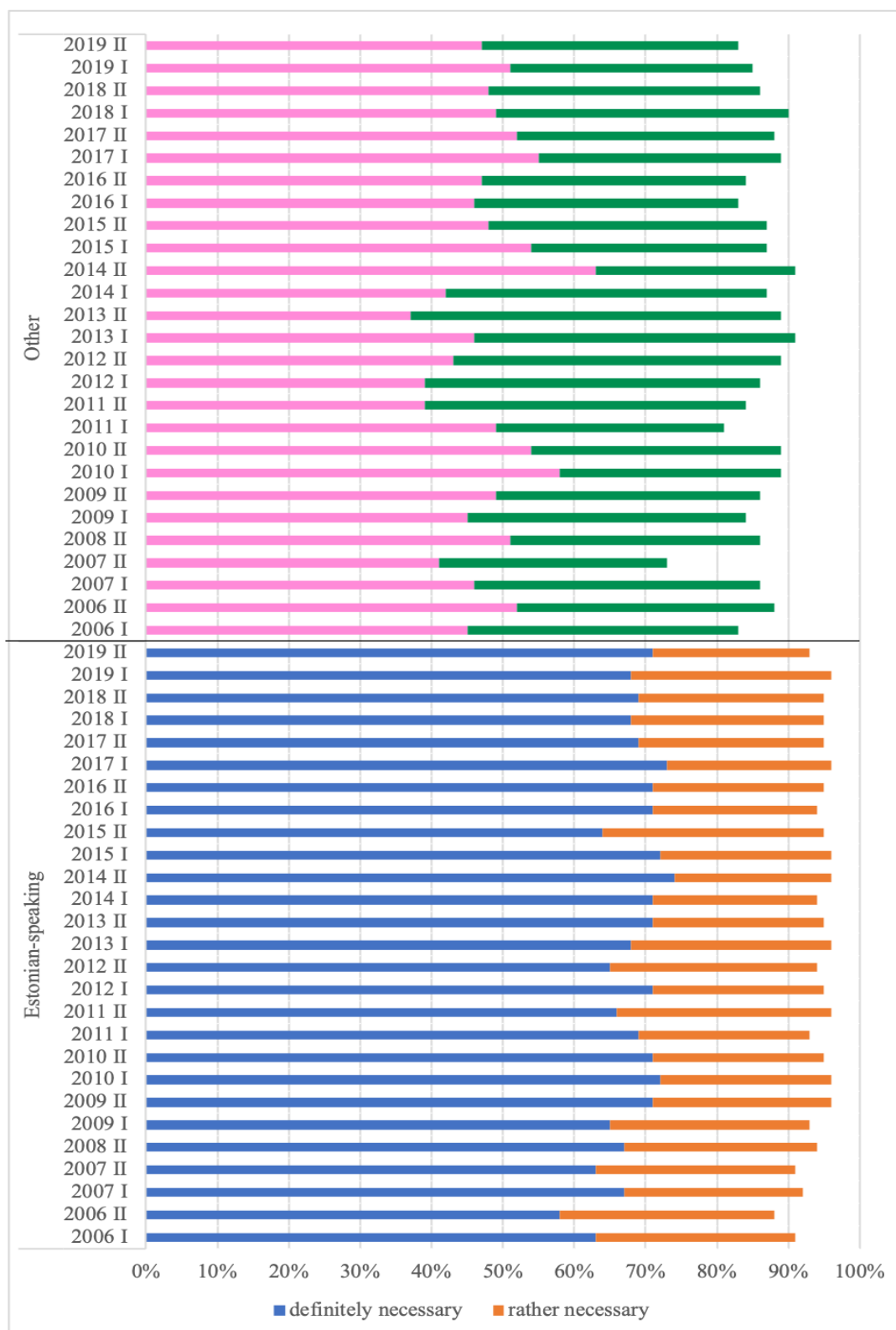


Figure 5. Attitude regarding conscription: based on nationality/respondents' main language of communication.

Source: Avalik arvamus ja riigikaitse, 2005-2019



#### **3.1.4. Variation in conscripts' willingness to go to conscript service**

Figure 6 illustrates how the willingness to go to conscript service among Russian-speaking conscripts has changed after 2014. The data includes numbers from two surveys: “Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription” (2007-2015) and “Problematic Relations During Conscription: Results of the Conscripts’ Survey 2016-2018”. Data is missing for the year 2009 since the particular question was not asked from the conscripts that year. During the first two years conscripts had also an opportunity to choose “I expressed my own will” as one possible answer. Later there were five options that remained: “I was glad to go”, “I was ready to do my duty”, “if there was a possibility I would have not gone”, “I came completely against my own will”, “hard to say”.

From the first year the survey was carried out until 2015 the most popular answer among Estonian-speaking conscripts was “I was ready to do my duty” while the share of those who were glad to go was also high. The total share of those Estonian-speakers who were either glad to go or were ready to do their duty was especially high between 2010-2015 – the total share was above 65% all six consecutive years and above 70% in 2010-2012. Between 2016-2018 the share of more motivated conscripts has dropped significantly and remained below 50% while the share of those who responded that “if there was a possibility I would have not gone” rose above 40%, being the most popular response. The highest share of those Estonian-speaking conscripts who went completely against their own will to service was in 2007 and 2016 – 11% in both years.

Russian-speaking conscripts' willingness to go to army has been a bit more volatile between 2007-2014 while the number of those who either expressed their own will or were glad to go was always higher than for Estonian-speaking conscripts during all these years. In 2015 the willingness of Russian-speaking conscripts dropped significantly – from 30% of those who were glad to go in 2014 down to 15% in 2015. By the year 2018 the share of those who were glad to go had dropped to 7% only while in the same year the share of those Russian-speakers who responded that they had come completely against their own will – 32% – was the highest of all time.

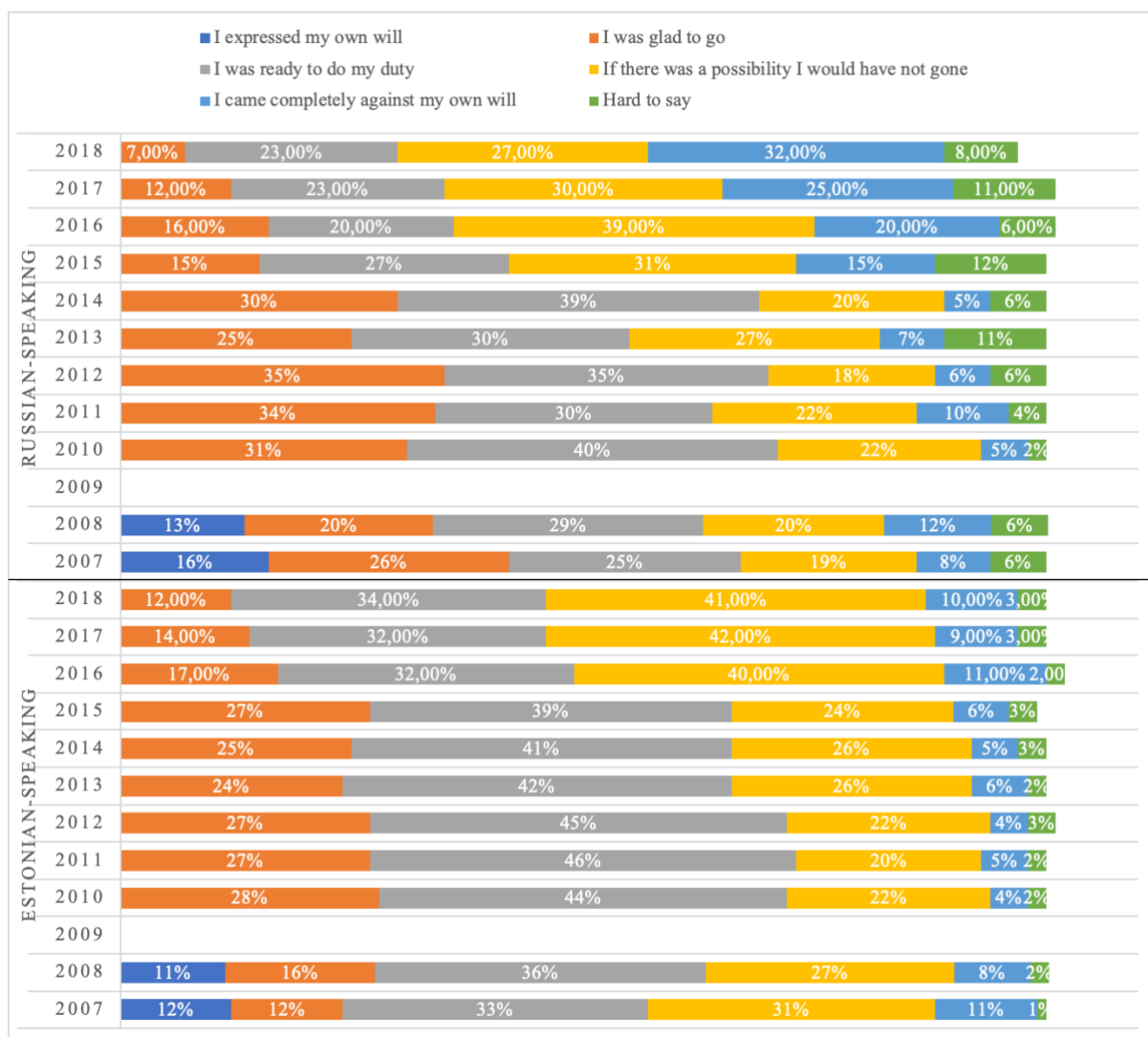


Figure 6. Willingness to go to the army: Estonian vs Russian-speaking conscripts.

Sources: Arvamused Eesti Kaitseväest enne ja pärast ajateenistust, 2007-2016; Problematic Relations During Conscription: Results of the Conscripts' Survey 2016-2018

The years when Russian-speaking conscripts' willingness was the highest was in 2007, 2010, 2012 and 2014, meaning the share of those Russian-speaking conscripts' who were glad to go or ready to do their duty was around 70%. In 2015 this share had dropped to 42% and by 2018 down to 30%. Interestingly enough it was in 2015 when Russian-speakers' willingness to go to army started to drop significantly, one year before the willingness of Estonian speakers' willingness dropped remarkably. As the results include two different types of survey data and the latest survey includes the years 2016-2018, the drop in Russian-speakers' willingness to go to military service cannot be related to the fact there were two different surveys measuring their willingness, as it could be argued to be one reason for the change in Estonian-speakers' willingness to go to army.

### **3.2. Findings from the interviews: explaining the gaps in attitudes towards conscription**

There were nine interviewees interviewed in total, including two former high-ranking officers of the Estonian Defence Forces, medium high official from the Estonian Ministry of Defence, official from the Headquarters of the Defence Forces, experts from think tanks and the former research manager of the two surveys which data was used for the thesis. Full list of the interviewees with their positions, time and length of the interviews is listed in Appendix 1. In order to answer the research questions, thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted.

Some general remarks on respondents' point of view about the differences in attitudes regarding conscription service:

- All nine interviewees found that the general attitude regarding conscription in Estonia is very positive and remarkably high comparing to many other countries in Europe and globally.
- Some found that the general attitude regarding conscription in Estonia has continuously improved over time and one professional stressed specifically the development in resilience of the Defence Forces.
- The most popular/common reason that were emphasized by the interviewees as for the differences in attitudes among different age groups was that the younger generation is directly affected but older generation is not.

- When providing explanation for why those who are conscripted or have recently been conscripted have different attitude regarding conscription than general population of Estonia, respondents had different opinions on what could be the reasons for differences, while two experts – from the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Resources Agency – did not agree that there is a different attitude among conscripts comparing to the general population.
- The most popular/common reason that were provided by the interviewees as to the differences in attitudes among different language-speakers was that Russian-speakers and Estonian-speakers have different threat perception towards Russia.
- When providing explanation to why Russian-speaking conscripts' willingness to go to compulsory military service was higher until 2014 but decreased significantly after that, respondents had different opinions while not everyone agreed that the war in Ukraine could have been a major factor.
- The most common possible solutions how to reduce differences in attitudes among various societal groups were related with the Russian schools in Estonia and national defense instruction at schools in general.

### **3.2.1. Gap between conscripts and general public**

As described in the last subchapter and depicted on Figure 1-3, there are considerable differences in attitudes regarding conscription among conscripts and the overall society in Estonia. When interviewing various experts in the field, it became clear that there are different opinions on this particular gap as such. These different opinions can be clustered based on the background of the expert, i.e., which organization they were representing – social scientists as well as the interviewees with military background agreed with the fact that there is a gap in attitudes regarding conscription between conscripts and the general public in Estonia, while interviewees representing the Ministry of Defence and its subunits did not agree that the particular gap exists. Those respondents who agreed that there is a gap between conscripts and general public, offered various explanations for why those who are conscripted or have recently been conscripted have different attitude regard conscription than general public in Estonia. For example, personal experience was seen as the most common reason – people who are directly affected by this obligation support it the least, while most of the respondents who argued it to be a reason, found it normal or natural phenomenon. Some of the interviewees noted that one reason why those

who are conscripted or have recently been conscripted have less positive attitude towards conscription is their personal experience or connection with it:

*It takes a lot of resources from a person, namely timewise. And nowadays, with more and more reserve exercises, it also deprives reservists their time resource that was not a case so much before. (Respondent 2)*

Another factor creating the negative impression regarding conscription among the conscripts themselves is that they have certain personal expectations which are not met:

*People come to conscript service and reserve training with certain personal expectations, and if these expectations are not met, one is disappointed. For example, conscripts enter the military service with the expectation that they will have their driver's license done during the military service. However, if for some reason they do not achieve this, they will be disappointed in the military service. [...] Reservists come to training for reservists for the purpose that something "exciting" will happen, and for continuous combat during the training period. If the real situation does not meet their expectations, they will be disappointed. (Respondent 4)*

*In recent years, there has indeed been such criticism from conscripts that they are being placed in barracks, but what to do, what they should do, is not given [...] officers have relaxed themselves. (Respondent 9)*

*The main thing conscripts are not happy with is that there is nothing to do. It is considered that the year is too long, the SBK will be conducted, but after that it will be such a waste of time which bother young people the most. (Respondent 5)*

Comparison in attitude between those who are not yet conscripted but are in a suitable age and those who have already gone through the service was also brought out:

*The readiness of the average young person is certainly lower than that of a professional who has already been assigned to conscription, and especially reservists. They have gone through the military themselves and it is clear that they think that others should do the same. (Respondent 5)*

Another aspect that some respondents pointed out, is that the attitude towards conscription among those who already passed the military service i.e., reservists, strongly depends on their personal experience. Those who have had positive experience, are more supportive towards military service and those who have experienced something negative during their service time e.g., arrogant attitudes from superiors or peer violence, are less supportive towards conscription as such (Respondent 3 and 9). It is also worthwhile to note, while not everyone who are eligible for conscription according to Estonian law are not called up for the service it can seem somewhat unjust for those who are called up and have to serve:

*Some kind of coercive obligation is always repulsive to a person [...] suppressing free will cannot be positive.* (Respondent 9)

Another factor creating the negative impression regarding conscription among the conscripts themselves is that they have certain personal expectations which are not met, they simply have nothing to do during their service and therefore they feel it is waste of time. According to one respondent the reason for this lies in the officers being too relaxed: “in recent years, there has indeed been such criticism from conscripts that they are being placed in barracks, but what to do, what they should do is not given. In short, the officers have become too relaxed” (Respondent 9). Another respondent, when referring to their own collected feedback from conscripts, noted that the length of military service is too long which is the main reason: “it is considered that the year is too long, the SBC [soldiers’ basic course] will be conducted, but after that it will be such a waste of time which bother young people the most. [...] if we ask whether military service could be shorter than it is now, then the majority prefers to do it in a shorter time (Respondent 5).

Another aspect that most of the respondents emphasized was general population’s lack of practical contact with military service as a reason why general population is more supportive towards conscription than those who are or have been conscripted:

*For the general population, the attitude towards military service is an abstract subject - we have a state, we have military service, of course we have to go. For professionals and private servicemen, it is a matter of concern to them.* (Respondent 5)

*They [the ordinary citizens] do not know how to assess military service and rather rely on general information that spreads or has been instilled for generations that military service is like an honour and every right man's duty. (Respondent 3)*

It was also brought out that a hypothetical reason for lower support of conscripts being the fact that they have their own 'skin in the game':

*What is really important is also the emergence of equality, which we have strived for so that more than 50% or the majority would still go until the majority does not go, there is such a feeling of inequality. This is not the case in Finland, as 98% of [conscripts] attend. If only 40% goes, it's like why I'm leaving and he's not going. (Respondent 8)*

### **3.2.2. Gap between young and elderly population**

There are certain differences in attitudes regarding conscription between young and elderly generations among Estonian population. This was also agreed by all of the respondents. When it was asked from the interviewees a possible explanation for why different age groups have different attitude regarding conscription, there were various answers given. In general, there was a common agreement among the respondents that the attitude regarding conscription depends a lot whether or not one has to go to the service oneself or not and therefore there is certainly a stronger support from the age group that is not affected itself. Nevertheless, those whose boyfriend, partner or spouse is recruited, might also feel less supportive towards conscription. The younger generation is the one who "have to put its own skin in the game" which causes reluctance (Respondent 1). Another aspect where there was a common understanding among the respondents is that the older generation understands the necessity of conscription due to their life experience, including Soviet occupation and time of war, as well as their understanding of a real security threat which is missing or is not directly related to national defence among younger population. While younger generation has already been born in the independent Estonia, after 1991, they certainly have different view to the world and freedom whereas they never had to fight for freedom (Respondent 7).

Many interviewees pointed out that young people simply do not see conscription as a prosperous plan while many high school graduates nowadays rather want to go to university, travel in foreign countries and eventually find a well-paid job:

*Among young people aged 15-19, defence willingness is not high because they want to plan their life and studies after high school. At this age they want to go abroad and there is a lack of positive image of staying in Estonia and study and work here after high school. (Respondent 4)*

*If we think from the point of view of an ordinary young man, it has become a norm in our society that who graduates from high school goes to university and starts a career or studies a job at a technical school. But this break in military service in the meantime makes many feels like they are losing time. (Respondent 5)*

*The younger generation is, in my view, much more pragmatic, and if they do not see concrete useful outputs from this compulsory military service, they will not be in favour of it (Respondent 3).*

Some found that comparing the age group over 60 years-old and younger ones is “completely irrelevant” since the Soviet-era system foresaw that everybody had to go while it is not the case anymore and therefore the group that has served in the Estonian Defence Forces should be analysed separately to have more equal comparison (Respondent 8).

### **3.2.3. Gap between Estonian-speakers and non-Estonian speakers**

The third hypothesis tested in this study posited that Estonian-speakers regard conscription more important than those with another language of communication. For testing this hypothesis, in addition to providing overall explanations to why attitude regarding conscription between those whose language of communication is Estonian and those with another language of communication differ, the respondents were asked to specifically evaluate three different aspects. Firstly, to evaluate association with Estonia as one’s own country; secondly, evaluation of language barrier; and thirdly, evaluation of use of different information space as a possible reason why those whose language of communication is other than Estonian support conscription less than those whose



language of communication is Estonian. This approach gave a possibility to give exact numbers how many respondents agreed with the statements and how many did not.

Five respondents agreed with the speculation that association with Estonia as one's own country is a possible reason why those whose language of communication is other than Estonian support conscription less than those whose language of communication is Estonian:

*I have called my 20-year series of studies a duplication of integration monitoring. The [NATO] allies are obsessed with the fact that they will be able to integrate the Russian population while they are here, and they have shown a great deal of interest in the Russian issue. The mindset is slightly different among the Russian-speaking population, namely trust in the state. (Respondent 5)*

*Another thing that came out in the focus groups when I talked to young Russian men is that they have many fears. First of all, they will be forcibly assimilated in the Estonian KV. There is a fear of bullying, discrimination. (Respondent 5)*

Two interviewees were neither agreeing nor disagreeing. According to Respondent 3 who has researched resilience among Russian-speaking young people in Estonia, their research has shown that Russian-speaking young people consider Estonia as their homeland, however, they believe the resources should be used elsewhere e.g., health care, economy or education. None of the respondents disagreed with the speculation. Two out of total nine interviewees abstained from evaluating the assumption.

Four interviewees agreed with the assumption that language barrier is a possible reason why those whose language of communication is other than Estonian support conscription less than those whose language of communication is Estonian. Three respondents were neither agreeing nor disagreeing. None of the respondents disagreed with the speculation. Two interviewees abstained from evaluating the assumption.

*The language barrier, as the Defence Forces say, is certainly scary at first [...] but most get over the language problem in the first two weeks (Respondent 6).*

*They [Russian-speaking youth] learn the language quickly. The majority of [Russian-speaking] young people can speak Estonian; another thing is whether they want to or not. (Respondent 9)*

*We know different stories. We know success stories that a young Russian speaker has gone to the [conscript] service who then at the time did not know the language at all, and who learned the language fluently and got so-called additional motivation. [...] But we also know the stories when the young people went to serve in the Defence Forces and they were relatively illiterate at the time [...] they had a series of problems, and then their sense of exclusion deepened, even more. (Respondent 3)*

*Our training centres are of different types - there are elite units where boys are also made to speak Estonian and there are those where it is easier to get through. And that is why the recruitment has tried to ensure that there are not too many Russian-speaking young people, but a certain percentage to integrate. (Respondent 5)*

All respondents agreed with a presumption that the use of different information space as a possible reason why those whose language of communication is other than Estonian support conscription less than those whose language of communication is Estonian. One interviewee abstained from evaluating the assumption.

*This [different information space] is not a factor only in the attitude towards military service but in the attitude towards the state. Attitude towards conscription is the result, not the cause. (Respondent 8)*

*We have two main regions with a lot of Russians - Tallinn and Ida-Virumaa. And there, especially the older generation, only listens to Russian propaganda, Russian radio, television and everything else. And it also affects young people who look after their parents and follow suit. (Respondent 9)*

*People do not have personal experience on national defence issues. Let's take the issue of Ukraine: the person who watched the Estonian media and the one who watched the Russian news have a completely different picture of what happened*

*in Ukraine, in Syria or anywhere. The same is true of the Estonian Defence Forces. If Russian information channels are the main sources of information, then a positive attitude towards the Defence Forces cannot emerge. (Respondent 5)*

*It is not even a question of these differences, but some information channels still contain very toxic and anti-Estonian information, even against NATO or the Estonian Defence Forces. The point is not that they monitor different information channels or from different sources, but that some of these sources have content that directly affects the reputation or image of the Defence Forces or the Defence Forces. (Respondent 3)*

#### **3.2.4. Willingness of conscripts to go to military service based on their language of communication**

The data from the surveys “Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription” (2007-2015) and “Problematic Relations During Conscription: Results of the Conscripts’ Survey 2016-2018“, shows that the willingness to go to military service among Russian-speaking conscripts has changed after 2014 as illustrated in Figure 6. Based on this data the interviewees were asked to provide possible explanations why Russian-speaking conscripts’ willingness to go to conscript service was higher than Estonian-speaking conscripts<sup>14</sup> until 2014 but decreased significantly after that. Multiple reasons were offered by the interviewees:

*It may be related to the general perception of threats. Perhaps since then, non-Estonian-speaking conscripts have also better understood who Estonia’s potential enemy in the event of war would be. (Respondent 2)*

*One reason is that the Kremlin launched very massive disinformation, propaganda campaigns against both NATO and the Baltic states, including Estonia. The service of the Defence Forces has been touched upon in these propaganda campaigns, and in connection with military exercises. (Respondent 3)*

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<sup>14</sup> Those who answered in respective two surveys “I was glad to go” was higher among Russian-speaking conscripts until 2014 (Figure 7).

*Until 2014 entering the military service meant the beginning of a military career with secure income for Russian-speaking conscripts, since 2015 they started living, studying and working outside Estonia, which seemed to be more profitable, while it was no longer necessary to acquire Estonian language to achieve one's goals (Respondent 4).*

*One component that was [...] the economic crisis. Then the readiness to go to conscription was higher, the unemployment rate was high and after school young people did not have the opportunity to directly start doing a career, they went to conscription instead. (Respondent 5)*

*Very simple. When Putin ordered the annexation of Crimea and, in essence, the occupation of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions of eastern Ukraine, it created enormous hostility and resistance sanctions against Russia. The same patriotism, or great Russian chauvinism, is also expressed among young people, when parents at home have an attitude that fascists or Ukrainians have started to rebel, young people have the same attitude, and of course the motivation disappears to some extent. (Respondent 9)*

*There is a direct reason - the war in Ukraine and the political, so to speak, theoretical possibility that there will be a conflict and that one must choose a party, was a big issue among the public at the time. (Respondent 8)*

*In the 2000s, there was still some lobbying in the Estonian-language media or by certain political forces in order to switch to a fully professional army. And most likely it found a resonance in the Estonian mass media than in the Russian language. (Respondent 2)*

Then the interviewees were asked to evaluate if the annexation of Crimea and war in Ukraine could have been a possible reason for why Russian-speaking conscripts' willingness to go to military service decreased after 2014 (some interviewees had mentioned that reason already before and in this case the question was not asked twice). Three respondents – think tank experts and former research manager of the surveys “Public opinion and national defence” and “Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription” – agreed that the events in Crimea and Eastern-Ukraine could have had an influence on Russian-speaking conscripts' willingness to go to military service in Estonia:

*Estonia as a state and Estonian society as a whole has supported Ukraine in this matter concerning the occupation of Crimea as well as the war in eastern Ukraine. This so-called Ukrainian issue has divided Estonian society according to mother tongue and ethnicity [...]* (Respondent 3)

Two interviewees – former high-ranking officers of the Estonian Defence Forces – both referred to the war in Ukraine in 2014 as a direct reason why Russian-speaking conscripts' willingness to go to army decreased already when they were first asked to provide possible explanations to Russian-speaking conscripts lower willingness to serve since 2014:

*War in Ukraine is a direct reason [...] and the political, so to speak, theoretical possibility that there will be a conflict and that one must choose a party, was a big issue among the public at the time.* (Respondent 8)

*When Putin ordered the annexation of Crimea and, in essence, the occupation of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions of Eastern Ukraine [...] patriotism, or great Russian chauvinism, is also expressed among young people, when parents at home have an attitude that fascists or Ukrainians have started to rebel, young people have the same attitude, and of course the motivation disappears to some extent.* (Respondent 9)

Neither respondent from the state institutions – Ministry of Defence and the Defence Resources Agency – agreed with the evaluation and the respondent from the Headquarters

of the Defence Forces did not wish to evaluate the aspect related to the events in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

### **3.2.5. Suggested solutions**

The interviewees were asked to provide possible solutions how to reduce differences in attitudes among various societal groups regarding conscription. Interestingly, all respondents offered solutions related to reducing differences among young people but not among elder generations because “these people are no longer changing”. Few opinions overlapped, including the need to increase the role of national defence instruction at schools and to improve the proficiency of state language i.e., Estonian. Other solutions included raising awareness, increasing the use of social-media, making military more youthful and technology-centred, but also that distinguishing should stop:

*If we want to reduce the differences among young people, we should emphasize the practicality of military service, such practicality close to life - useful skills, networking (I mean expanding my horizons as well as useful contact networks) should be emphasized, in short, something that today's young people understand. In addition, to make it more youthful, why not link it to modern technologies and the virtual world so as not to be so rigid and stuck in the 19th-20th century paradigm. (Respondent 3)*

*The activities of Young Eagles [Noorkotkad] and Home Daughters [Kodutütred] and their introduction to the public and coverage in the media. (Respondent 4)*

### **3.2.6. Summary of main empirical findings**

The general population in Estonia has been strongly in favour of compulsory conscript service for young men ever since the question was included in the survey since 2005. The attitude regarding compulsory military service among conscripts themselves is less supportive than among the general public, while the difference is bigger among those who find conscription definitely necessary. There are differences across age groups towards compulsory military service, while the youngest respondents' age group (between 15- and 29-year-olds) are least supportive and the oldest age group (between 60- and 75-year-

olds) are most supportive towards conscription service in Estonia. Differences in attitudes towards compulsory military service are also identified across respondents' language of communications. Differences between Estonian speakers and Russian speakers are bigger among those who find conscription definitely necessary. The lowest support to compulsory military service among Russian-speaking population was in the second half of 2007. Willingness to go to conscript service among Russian-speaking conscripts has changed after 2014. Between 2007-2014 the number of those Russian-speaking conscripts who either expressed their own will or were glad to go to military service was higher than among Estonian-speaking conscripts during all these years. After 2014 the willingness of Russian-speaking conscripts dropped significantly.

Personal experience was seen as the most common reason for the lower support for conscription among conscripts themselves in comparison with general public in Estonia. Interviewees suggested that people who are directly affected by this obligation support it the least which was also argued to be a natural phenomenon. Among the other possible explanations for conscripts' lower support were mentioned that their personal expectations are not met during their service and their freedom is restricted. It was suggested that those conscripts who have had positive experience, are more supportive towards military service and those who have experienced something negative during their service time e.g., arrogant attitudes from superiors or peer violence, are less supportive towards conscription as such. It was also suggested that the possible reason why support for conscription is higher among the general public is that the latter lacks practical contact with military service while relying on general information about its importance and necessity. When providing possible explanations for variations among age groups, there was a common agreement among the respondents that the attitude regarding conscription depends a lot whether or not one has to go to the service oneself and therefore there is certainly a stronger support from the age group that is not affected itself. All respondents agreed with the presumption that the use of different information space is a possible reason why those whose language of communication is other than Estonian support conscription less than those whose language of communication is Estonian. Some respondents agreed with speculations that association with Estonia as one's own country and the language barrier could be possible reasons why those whose language of communication is other than Estonian support conscription less. According to the

respondents' speculations, potential reasons why Russian-speaking conscripts' willingness to go to military service significantly decreased after 2014 included the impact of economic crisis, Kremlin's successful disinformation campaign and the events in Ukraine (annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine). The possible solutions suggested by the interviewees included improving the proficiency of state language, raising awareness about conscription in society, increasing the use of social-media when popularizing conscription, making military more youthful and technology-centred.



## CONCLUSION

The objective of this thesis was to explore whether and how attitudes towards conscription vary across different societal groups as well as over time, and to offer and evaluate possible explanations for why these variations exist. During the post-Cold War era many countries have replaced conscription with professional voluntary armies, while some have still retained it. In democratic countries public opinion is essential for policymaking, this applies also for security and defence policies. In order to have a credible security and defence policy in place, on the one hand, a state has to be capable to organize and retain its military means, while on the other hand, there has to be a certain degree of acceptance of these measures by the public (Manigart, 2000, p. 27). Acceptance by the public is especially important in those countries where citizens have to directly participate in national defence. This applies well to Estonia that was used as a case study in this thesis. Estonia was also the only country among new members of NATO that decided to keep a compulsory draft system in place throughout the years of membership.

- 1) The first chapter aimed to conceptualize ‘conscription’ and ‘societal gaps in attitudes towards conscription’. For this, it firstly gave an overview of contemporary trends of conscription primarily in Europe and NATO countries – which countries have ended conscription, where it is still being practiced and what are the reasons behind these choices. It then outlined contemporary literature on public opinion towards conscription and military service in general. Compulsory military service decreases mass support for war, mainly caused by concerns of self-interests (Horowitz & Levendusky, 2011, p. 525) which is a driving force of citizen’s behaviour when they have ‘skin in the game’ and have to think about their personal costs and benefits (Chong, Citrin, & Conley, 2001, p. 541). The thesis proposed four hypotheses: 1) conscripts consider conscription service to be less important than the general population of Estonia; 2) younger population consider conscription service to be less important than the older generation; 3) residents whose main language of communication is not Estonian consider conscription service to be less important than those whose language of communication is Estonian; 4) the willingness to serve in the army of those conscripts whose language of communication is Russian has decreased after

international crises involving the Russian Federation and/or Russian-speaking minorities.

The second chapter examined Estonia as a case study, introduced the background of the country and its national defence system in detail, and explained the methods and data used. Public opinion in Estonia towards national defence, including conscript service, has been studied continuously over two decades which offered unusually rich data on a subject where existing research has been limited. The thesis used a multimethod design where quantitative data was extracted from opinion surveys and qualitative data from expert interviews. The thesis mapped trends in public support to conscription over the period from 2005 to 2019 and across different social groups. Survey data from three survey studies commissioned by the Estonian Ministry of Defence, Estonian Defence Resources Agency and Centre of Excellence for Strategic Sustainability was used. For analysing the survey data, conventional techniques of statistical analysis were used. There were nine semi-structured expert interviews carried out in April 2020 in order to map explanations for those variations among different social groups towards conscription service. For analysing the results of the interviews thematic analysis was used and thematic coding table was created. The third chapter gave an overview of the results of the three surveys conducted regarding the attitude towards conscription service in Estonia. Results from three survey research were combined in order to depict the differences among different societal groups. The results of nine expert interviews, where qualitative data was generated, were then outlined, in order to find possible reasons why these variations exist between different societal group.

The data of three opinion surveys showed that there has been a strong public support among the general population throughout the years. However, certain differences among various social groups in their attitudes regarding conscription were depicted. For example, compared to the general population there was a lower support for conscription service among younger generation, among conscripts themselves and among Russian-speaking population. There were also some interesting nuances, including higher level of willingness of Russian-speaking conscripts of going to the military service than of Estonian-speaking conscripts. The attitude regarding compulsory military service among conscripts themselves was less supportive than among the general public, while the

difference was bigger among those who found conscription definitely necessary. The youngest respondents' age group (between 15- and 29-year-olds) were least supportive and the oldest age group (between 60- and 75-year-olds) were most supportive towards conscript service. Differences between Estonian speakers and Russian speakers were also depicted and were the biggest among those who found conscription definitely necessary. Support towards military service among Russian-speaking conscripts has been volatile: the lowest support was in the second half of 2007 and their willingness to go to conscript service changed after 2014. Between 2007-2014 the number of those Russian-speaking conscripts who either expressed their own will or were glad to go to military service was always higher than for Estonian-speaking conscripts during these years. After 2014 the willingness of Russian-speaking conscripts dropped significantly.

The expert interviews offered multiple explanations for these differences in attitudes across the social groups towards conscript service. Personal experience was seen as the most common reason for the lower support for conscription among conscripts themselves in comparison with general public in Estonia. Interviewees suggested that people who were directly affected by conscription supported it the least which was also argued to be a natural phenomenon. Among the other possible explanations for conscripts' lower support towards military service the respondents suggested that conscripts' personal expectations were not met during their service and their freedom was restricted. The more supportive attitude towards conscription among general public was argued to be due to their limited exposure to it while they rely on general information about its importance and necessity. There was a common agreement among the interviewees that the variations among age groups existed since the attitude regarding conscription depends a lot whether or not one has to go to military service oneself or not and therefore there was certainly a stronger support from the age group that was not affected itself. All respondents argued that the use of different information space was a direct reason why those whose language of communication is other than Estonian support conscription less than those whose language of communication is Estonian. Some respondents suggested that association with Estonia as one's own country and the language barrier were also reasons why those whose language of communication is other than Estonian supported conscription less. According to the respondents, the reasons why Russian-speaking conscripts' willingness to go to military service significantly decreased after 2014 included the impact of

economic crisis, Kremlin successful disinformation campaign and the events in Ukraine (annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine). The interviewees suggested possible solutions for decreasing the differences among social groups regarding their attitude towards conscript service which included the improvement of proficiency of Estonian as the state language, raising awareness about conscription in society, increasing the use of social-media when popularizing conscription, making military more youthful and technology-centred.

The thesis suggested that finding and understanding the reasons of the societal gaps in attitudes regarding conscription would help policy makers to evaluate possible weaknesses of the system and consider certain changes in defence policies. Better understanding of the cleavages among different societal groups regarding their attitude towards conscript service would also help to promote national service and improve civil-military cooperation within the society. Estonia with its small population, scarce defence resources and challenging geostrategic position, needs the civilian population to be united with the military for its total defence system to work effectively.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

**Table 1. Interview details.**

	Interviewee	Position	Type <sup>15</sup>	Time of interview	Duration
1	Peep Tambets (Respondent 1)	Deputy Director General of the Defence Resources Agency	Telephone	5 April 2020	15:09 minutes
2	Ivo Juurvee (Respondent 2)	Head of Security and Resilience Programme at the International Centre for Defence and Security	Skype	8 April 2020	19:04 minutes
3	Dmitri Teperik (Respondent 3)	Chief Executive of the International Centre for Defence and Security; Co-author of the survey “Primary world-view characteristics of Russian-speaking young adults in Estonia”	Telephone	9 April 2020	26:47 minutes
4	Pille Priilinn- Türk (Respondent 4)	Head of Social Services at the Estonian Defence Forces	E-mail	15 April 2020	n/a

<sup>15</sup> All interviews were carried out either via telephone, Skype or e-mail since face-to-face interviews were not possible due to COVID-19 pandemic.

5	Juhan Kivirähk (Respondent 5)	Research manager at Turu-uuringute AS (until January 2020); former research manager of the surveys “Public opinion and national defence” and “Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription”	Skype	16 April 2020	46:47 minutes
6	Madis Mikko (Respondent 6)	Director of the Estonian National Defence Course	Telephone	16 April 2020	14:06 minutes
7	Anonymous respondent (Respondent 7)	Medium high official at the Ministry of Defence	Telephone	16 April 2020	15:38 minutes
8	Riho Terras (Respondent 8)	General; Head of the Estonian Defence Forces 2011-2018; Member of the European Parliament since 2020 (EPP); Member of the Pro Patria Party	Skype	26 November 2020	14:01 minutes
9	Ants Laaneots (Respondent 9)	General; Head of th Estonian Defence Forces 2006-2011; Member of the Parliament of Estonia since 2015; Member of the Reform Party	Telephone	30 April 2020	26:45 minutes

## Form of Consent

### NÕUSOLEKU VORM

#### Informeerimise ja teadliku nõusoleku vorm

Intervjuu teema: erinevate ühiskondade suhtumine kaitsevähkohustusse Eestis (Sigrid Nuutre magistritöö tarbeks). Magistritöö eesmärk on teha kindlaks kas ja kuidas suhtumine kohustuslikku kaitseväheteenistusse erineb erinevate ühiskonnagruppide lõikes Eestis ja pakkuda ning hinnata võimalikke põhjendusi, miks säärased erinevused eksisteerivad.

Mind on teavitatud intervjuu teemast ja eesmärkidest, sh kuidas minu antud vastuseid/ütlusi kasutatakse.

Mul on olnud võimalus esitada uurijale küsimusi intervjuu kohta ja küsimustele on vastatud.

*Optional<sup>16</sup>: Andes oma nõusoleku uurimuses osaleda mõistan, et minu ütlusi ei seota minu isikuga ning andmete esitamisel tagatakse intervjuueeritavate anonüümsus.*

Mõistan, et mul on õigus küsimustele vastamisest keelduda ning katkestada oma osalus uurimistöös mistahes hetkel.

Käesolevaga kinnitan, et nõustun antud intervjuus osalema vabatahtlikult ja annan loa intervjuud digitaalselt salvestada.

Uurja/intervjuueerija kohustub täitma intervjuueerimisandmete säilitamisel seaduses sätestatud nõudeid.

Nimi: (suurte tähtedega) \_\_\_\_\_

Allkiri: \_\_\_\_\_

Kuupäev: \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>16</sup> All nine interviewees were sent a consent form where they had an option to choose for confidentiality. One interviewee (Respondent 7) chose to remain confidential and all other eight respondents chose not to i.e., all interviewees but one gave a written consent that their names are allowed to be used in this thesis.

## Interview Guide

1. Milline on teie hinnangul Eesti elanike suhtumine kaitseväekohustusse? Kuidas see on aja jooksul muutunud?
2. Kuidas erineb teie hinnangul/ teie kogemuse põhjal suhtumine eri ühiskonnagruppide lõikes? Nt eestikeelse ja ja muukeelse elanikkonna seas, erinevate vanusegruppide vahel, ajateenistusega kukkupuutunud ja muu elanikkonna vahel?
3. Küsitlusuuringud on näidanud, et nooremaealised toetavad kohustuslikku kaitseväeteenistust vähem kui vanemaalised (erinevus 15–19-aastaste ja üle 60-aastaste vastanute vahel on kohati lausa 35–40%). Kuidas Teie sellist erinevust seletaksite?
4. Küsitlusuuringud on näidanud, et ajateenijate ja reservväelaste toetus kaitseväekohustusele on märkimisväärselt madalam kui muu elanikkonna toetus (kohati kahekordne erinevus). Kuidas sellist erinevust seletaksite?
  - a. Kui vastust ei tule, siis: kas ajateenistuses käinute madalam toetus võib tulla sellest, et erinevalt teistest on neil oma nahk mängus?
5. Küsitlusuuringud on näidanud, et muu emakeelega vastajate toetus kaitseväekohustusele on väiksem kui eesti emakeelega vastanute oma. Kuidas sellist erinevust seletaksite?
  - a. Kui vastust ei tule, siis:
    - i. Kas nende vähene seostatus Eesti kui oma riigi suhtes võib olla üks põhjus?
    - ii. Kas keelebarjäär võib olla oluline tegur?
    - iii. Kas erinevate infokanalite tarbimine võib olla veel üks oluline tegur?
6. Küsitlusuuringud on näidanud, et vene emakeelega ajateenijate motivatsioon teenistusse asuda oli kuni aastani 2014 kõrgem kui eesti emakeelega ajateenijatel, aastatel 2015 ja 2016 on see drastiliselt langenud. Kuidas sellist muutust seletaksite?

- a. Kui vastust ei tule, siis: kas Krimmi annekteerimine ja sõda Ukrainas võib olla üheks põhjuseks? Kui oluline või marginaalne see põhjus teie hinnangul on?
7. Kuidas Teie hinnangul neid erinevaid lõhesid suhtumises ajateenistuse saaks või peaks vähendama?

**Thematic Coding Table**

No.	Code label (theme)	Description of code	Examples of quote (from interview data)	No. of coded segments
1.	General attitude regarding conscription	Each participant's assessment of Estonia's general population's attitude regarding conscription	<p>"support has been very high"</p> <p>"those young people directly affected by military service have slightly lower support"</p> <p>"support has risen steadily, and the only group of people among whom this support is not very high is young men before military service."</p>	<p>9</p> <p>4</p>
2.	Attitude across age groups	Providing explanation for why different age groups have different attitude regarding conscription.	<p>"older people understand and value military service better"</p> <p>"younger people perceive security threats different and not so drastically"</p> <p>"young people value their personal time more than older generation"</p> <p>"young people are pragmatic - if they do not see useful output in it [conscription] they do not support conscription"</p>	<p>6</p> <p>3</p> <p>4</p> <p>1</p>



3.	Attitude among conscripts	Providing explanation for why those who are conscripted or have recently been conscripted have different attitude regard conscription than general population of Estonia.	<p>“personal experience or connection”</p> <p>“Some kind of coercive obligation is always repulsive to a person.”</p> <p>“suppressing free will cannot be positive”</p>	<p>5</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p>
4.	Attitude based on language	Providing explanation to why attitude regarding conscription between those whose language of communication is Estonian and those with another language of communication differ.	<p>“Yes, it [association with Estonia as one’s own country] can be one reason”</p> <p>“Our research showed that they still consider Estonia their homeland.”</p>	<p>5</p> <p>1</p>
5.	Willingness of conscripts to go to military service	Providing explanation to why Russian-speaking conscripts’ willingness to go to military service was higher until 2014 but decreased significantly in 2015 and 2016.	<p>“war in Ukraine a direct reason”</p> <p>“economic crisis”</p> <p>“Kremlin disinformation campaign against NATO and the Baltic States”</p>	<p>2</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p>

6.	Possible solutions	Providing possible solutions how to reduce differences in attitudes among various societal groups regarding conscription.	“sharing positive experiences in military service among friends and family”	2
			“greater contribution to national defence education”	3
			“raising awareness”	2
			“very difficult, if not impossible, to change attitudes among older generations”	1

**Sample information of the survey “Public Opinion and National Defence”  
(Ministry of Defence 2001-2019<sup>17</sup>).**

<b>Time of survey</b>	<b>Type of survey</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
2001-02	Face-to-face interviews	988
2001-06	Face-to-face interviews	972
2001-10	Face-to-face interviews	990
2002-03	Face-to-face interviews	951
2002-06	Face-to-face interviews	964
2002-10	Face-to-face interviews	989
2003-02	Face-to-face interviews	988
2003-06	Face-to-face interviews	988
2003-10	Face-to-face interviews	984
2004-02	Face-to-face interviews	978
2004-06	Face-to-face interviews	975
2004-10	Face-to-face interviews	n/a
2005-03	Face-to-face interviews	965
2005-06	Face-to-face interviews	959
2005-11	Face-to-face interviews	936
2006-05	Face-to-face interviews	1022
2006-10	Face-to-face interviews	993
2006-12	Face-to-face interviews	999
2007-01	Face-to-face interviews	1008
2007-07	Face-to-face interviews	991
2008-08	Face-to-face interviews	995
2009-01	Face-to-face interviews	1012
2009-05	Face-to-face interviews	1000
2010-01	Face-to-face interviews	1000
2010-09	Face-to-face interviews	1000

<sup>17</sup> The sample information in Appendix 5 includes the years from the first survey in 2001 until 2019, however, this thesis used the data from 2005 until 2019 since public attitude towards conscription has been studied since 2005.

2011-08	Face-to-face interviews	1000
2011-10	Face-to-face interviews	1206
2012-03	Face-to-face interviews	1200
2012-10	Face-to-face interviews	1200
2013-03	Face-to-face interviews	1204
2013-10	Face-to-face interviews	1204
2014-03	Face-to-face interviews	1203
2014-11	Face-to-face interviews	1219
2015-04	Face-to-face interviews	1207
2015-10	Face-to-face interviews	1193
2016-03	Face-to-face interviews	1203
2016-10	Face-to-face interviews	1206
2017-03	Face-to-face interviews	1202
2017-10	Face-to-face interviews	1201
2018-03	Face-to-face interviews	1209
2018-10	Face-to-face interviews	1215
2019-03	Face-to-face interviews	1209
2019-10	Face-to-face interviews	1226

**Sample information of the survey “Opinions about Estonian Defence Forces before and after conscription” (Defence Resources Agency 2007-2016<sup>18</sup>).**

<b>Time of survey</b>	<b>Type of survey</b>	<b>Respondents' type</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Native language of respondent: Russian</b>
2007	postal survey	conscripts	1139	21%
		reservists	669	14%
2008	postal survey	conscripts	1253	26%
		reservists	625	14%
2009	postal survey	conscripts	972	20%
		reservists	654	14%
2010	postal survey	conscripts	1199	12%
		reservists	589	12%
2011	postal survey	conscripts	1132	10%
		reservists	401	8%
2012	postal survey	conscripts	1207	13%
		reservists	522	7%
2013	postal survey	conscripts	1103	11%
		reservists	568	7%
2014	postal survey	conscripts	1001	13%
		reservists	489	7%
2015	online survey	conscripts	1005	12%
		reservists	715	9%
2016	online survey	conscripts	944	13%
		reservists	628	9%

<sup>18</sup> The sample information in Appendix 6 includes all the years the survey was carried out; however, this thesis used the data from 2007 until 2015 since data from 2016 was extracted from another survey.

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