

# WHAT IF THEY FORGET WHO I AM? FEARS OF ESTONIAN CONSCRIPTS IN CONNECTION WITH THE SERVICE

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**Abstract.** The paper analyzes the fears that conscripts have during their conscription period. The analysis is based on the conscript survey in the human resources research project started in the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) in 2016. As civilian life and the life that young men experience under the compulsory draft differ quite drastically, our research focuses on the question of what fears conscripts have in connection with the service. In this paper we analyze the open (free text) answers to the aforementioned question where the participants could elaborate on the fears they experience. The results are evaluated in relation to life-course theories and in context of societal changes in Estonia. The analysis also allowed us to examine the congruence between the conceptualization of Estonian conscription and the life goals of young men in the context of Estonian society. The results of the analysis show 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.

**Keywords:** *conscription, life-course, human resources research project, Estonian Defence Forces*

**Võtmesõnad:** *ajateenistus, elukaar, inimvara kompleksuuring, Eesti Kaitsevägi*

## 1. Introduction

Estonia, since its independence, has gone through multiple economic and societal reforms that have included drastic changes in almost all spheres of society. The rapidly changing security and defence environment of recent years has challenged the structures of military organizations as well. Interestingly, regardless of all these changes, Estonia has retained conscription service with high levels of support from the public. At first glance, the military might seem to have remained the same since the re-establishment of Estonian independence, but in fact, it has also undergone changes in its structure and leadership practices. However, the question remains whether the changes in the conceptualization of conscription service are congruent with the overall

societal changes in Estonia. From our perspective, studying the fears of young men starting the service gives us insight into how well the military can adapt to the rapid societal changes and how these affect the principles of compulsory conscription service. Our research question coincides with the survey question: what do conscripts fear in connection with their military service?

As the conscripts were not asked to elaborate on their positive opinions concerning the service period or the personal resources that they see as helpful for successfully completing the service, we are unable to provide a more balanced view of conscription. Although this has been rectified in the 2017–2018 data gathering period, we do believe that we should also give a voice to the critical viewpoints in order to understand them and improve the Estonian conscription service.

In Estonia, military service is divided into mandatory duty to serve in the Defence Forces and active service. Mandatory duty encompasses conscription service and reserve service, which a person liable to the national defence obligation has to undergo within the determined period of time. Conscription service is the performance of the mandatory duty with the purpose of acquiring basic military training in order to serve in the Defence Forces. It is compulsory for males liable to the national defence obligation; females are not required to serve, but may do so voluntarily. A person serving in conscription service is known as a conscript<sup>1</sup>.

Estonia practices a form of conscription service whereby all men who are between the ages of 17–27 become call-up selectees and are expected to serve as conscripts, unless they become exempt from duty due to reasons provided in the Military Service Act<sup>2</sup>. Conscription service (mandatory training) lasts either for 8 or 11 months; the length of service depends on the military trade and also whether the conscript is designated for non-commissioned officer (NCO) training or not. Once the conscripts start their service, they undergo basic training that lasts for three months, during which practices of leave depend on the place of service. Some units allow weekend leave already during basic training, but other units allow weekend leave only after basic training is completed. After basic training those who have been selected for an 11-month period start the NCO and military trade training. Those selected

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<sup>1</sup> **Military Service Act**. – RT I, 01.07.2016, § 5 (2). <<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530062016006/consolide>> (11.05.2018). [**Military Service Act**]

<sup>2</sup> **Military Service Act**, § 38.

for an 8-month period start military trade and later sub-unit training<sup>3</sup>. Since 2013 women can volunteer for conscription service, but women have been left out of our study because as of yet there are very few female conscripts in the EDF. Women can also decide to leave the service during the first ninety days without any repercussions, except that they cannot apply for conscription service again<sup>4</sup>. Male conscripts can time their service period by submitting an application to the Defence Resources Agency. Their request will be taken into account as far as possible if they successfully pass the medical examination.

In 2016, the EDF started a human resources research project to provide sufficient knowledge and regular monitoring regarding human resources in the national defence sector. We used data from the first round of the conscript survey (data collected in 2016–2017). We analyzed data from two groups who participated in the survey: conscripts who started military service in July 2016 and in October 2016. We used answers to open-ended questions as qualitative data to grasp the full range of thoughts about fears that are an important concern for conscripts.

As qualitative researchers we acknowledge that our underlying attitudes and assumptions can affect our research, therefore we want to make our position as researchers as transparent as possible. The first author of this paper has been a member of the Women's Voluntary Defence Organization since 2000 and the second author is currently working at the Estonian National Defence College. We both support conscription and the reserve-based defence model that Estonia has chosen for national defence.

The military is the part of the society that has been called upon to defend, so it is also vital to have an understanding of the given society. Therefore, the following section gives a short overview of the societal changes that have influenced Estonia since the country regained its independence in 1991, with particular emphasis on the youth.

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<sup>3</sup> **Defence Resources Agency.**

<<https://www.kra.ee/ajateenistus/ajateenistusest/valjaoppetsukkel>> (05.05.2018).

<sup>4</sup> **National Defence Duties Act.** – RT I, 13.04.2018, § 82 (11). <<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/Riigikogu/act/518042018001/consolide>> (11.05.2018).

## 2. Context: society and individualization of life-course

The underlying social processes taking place in western societies over the course of the past decades are described as developments towards risk society, individualization, marketization, de-institutionalization etc. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim<sup>5</sup> have pointed out that the increasing levels of individualization and freedom of choice have provided everyone with the responsibility to design their own life-course, which inevitably induces the need to personally plan and effectuate more and more aspects of life. Estonia is no exception here; as a society it has undergone numerous economic and societal changes in fairly rapid succession since 1991. These changes have formed a society geared towards neoliberal values of competitiveness and orientation to success<sup>6</sup>. In the transformation process, over the course of years, economic dimensions of reforms have been prioritized, while distracting from their social implications<sup>7</sup>. Such an orientation to economic success has also strongly highlighted the individual's responsibility in social mobility<sup>8</sup>. The shift in values has involved a shift in the normative hierarchy of values, where the more collective Soviet-era ideals of universal solidarity, collective interests etc. were replaced by more individualistic values like individual interest, success and competition<sup>9</sup>. Inglehart and Welzel<sup>10</sup> divide values into two categories: firstly, traditional versus secular-rational and secondly, survival versus self-expression. The continuums have values like economic and physical security on the one end and the appreciation for self-expression, subjective well-being and quality of life on the other. They argue that Eastern European countries, including Estonia, are yet to make the value shift from materialist, survival values towards self-expression values, a process that has

<sup>5</sup> **Beck, Ulrich; Beck-Gernsheim, Elisabeth** 2002. *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences*, London: Sage. [Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 2002]

<sup>6</sup> **Lauristin, Marju; Vihalemm, Peeter** 2010. *Estonia's Transition to the EU: Twenty Years On*, New York: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> **Kennedy, Michael D.** 2002. *Cultural Formations of Postcommunism: Emancipation, Transition, Nation, and War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 103–154.

<sup>8</sup> **Lauristin, Marju** 2003. *Social Contradictions Shadowing Estonia's "Success Story"*. – *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 11 (4), pp. 601–616.

<sup>9</sup> **Talves, Kairi** 2018. *The dynamics of gender representations in the context of Estonian social transformations*. – *Dissertationes Sociologicae Universitatis Tartuensis*, Tartu: University of Tartu Press.

<sup>10</sup> **Inglehart, Ronald; Welzel, Christian** 2005. *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

taken place in most Western and to some extent in post-communist Central European countries. A shift in the values, at least in official discourse, has started to take place as evidenced by the most recent speeches of the President of Estonia who also emphasises more self-expression and communal values<sup>11, 12</sup>. However, this shift is not yet clearly expressed in the mind-sets of the general public, as evidenced by social surveys in Estonia. In general, values in Estonian society still emphasise personal success, economic well-being and individual development, that is, values that are associated with working, earning and spending money<sup>13</sup>.

In regards to young people, studies show that in the beginning of the 1990s they were less oriented towards altruistic values, such as being of use to the society. On the other hand, values connected to social position have become more important, particularly those related to material well-being, but also not having to work too hard and forgoing physically taxing work<sup>14</sup>. These aspects characterize the developments of post-transition societies where it is often believed that material well-being is strongly tied to hedonism and consumption<sup>15</sup>. Realo found that values connected to self-expression rose back to the level they had achieved prior to regaining independence only in 2008<sup>16</sup>, though already the 1980s saw the fast changes of collective values towards more individualistic ones<sup>17</sup>. It is also important to realize that the military will soon be conscripting more and more young men whose parents were the young and most affluent segment in the society during the

<sup>11</sup> **Vabariigi President Vabariigi aastapäeva kontserdil ja vastuvõtul Eesti Rahva Muuseumis.** Vabariigi President. <<https://www.president.ee/et/ametitegevus/koned/14153-2018-02-24-10-47-40/index.html>> (01.04.2018).

<sup>12</sup> **President Kersti Kaljulaid Eesti Vabariigi iseseisvuspäeva aktusel 24. veebruaril 2017 Estonia kontserdisaalis.** Vabariigi President. <<https://www.president.ee/et/ametitegevus/koned/13080-2017-02-24-15-30-19/index.html>> (01.04.2018).

<sup>13</sup> **Kalmus, Veronika; Talves, Kairi; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Pille** 2013. Behind the Slo-gan of “e-State:” Digital Stratification in Estonia. – The Digital Divide: The Internet and Social Inequality in International Perspective. Ed. by Ragnedda, M.; Muschert, G. London: Routledge, p. 195.

<sup>14</sup> **Rämmer, Andu** 2018. Sotsiaalse tunnetuse muutused Eesti siirdeühiskonna kontekstis. – *Dissertationes Sociologicae Universitatis Tartuenss, Tartu: University of Tartu Press*, p. 34. [**Rämmer** 2018]

<sup>15</sup> **Kalmus, Veronika; Vihalemm, Triin** 2017. Väärtused ja identiteedid. – Eesti ühiskond kiirenevas ajas. Toim. Vihalemm, P.; Lauristin, M.; Kalmus, V.; Vihalemm, T. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, p. 127. [**Kalmus, Vihalemm** 2017]

<sup>16</sup> **Realo, Anu** 2013. Estonian Human Development Report 2012/2013: Estonia in the World, Tallinn: Eesti Koostöökogu, pp. 48–58.

<sup>17</sup> **Rämmer** 2018, p. 55.

early years of transition – those who became the ‘winners’ of transition and showed high rates of adaptability in the new and rapidly changing environments. This was the generation that gave a higher estimation to their social position, regardless of their education, income and social status; they also perceived their social position higher compared with older generations by virtue of being young<sup>18</sup>.

Additionally, being young and well-off means a stronger orientation towards individualistic, success-oriented values<sup>19</sup>. This is also echoed in statistics: in 2015 the percentage of young people simultaneously working and attending high-school was almost 10% and in 2016 already almost 40% of people between the ages of 15–24<sup>20</sup>. Having a job while studying can be associated with the need to achieve economic well-being, but it also reflects the expectations of the labor market that initial work experience is highly valued when starting a career. At the same time, it is clear that the younger generations now have more difficulty garnering success at a relatively early stage in their life as the desirable positions are already in the hands of the 1970s cohorts. The younger generations are encouraged into start-up type of activities, which demand investing ample time to achieve one’s goals. As those between the ages of 15–20 and 21–30 assign more importance to life-style and social status related components compared to previous generations, where cultural and spiritual common experiences hold a much more significant value, it is also reflected in the social practices and life expectations of today’s young people<sup>21</sup>. Kalmus *et al.* interpret such a development as the result of the fragmentation of cultural experiences and the pluralization of worldview.

Keeping in mind the changes that have taken place in Estonia, we now turn to the concept of life-course, in the context of fast-paced modern life, which is geared towards being in the right place at the right time to create opportunities for personal development. It also places more responsibility on the individual to take initiative and steer one’s life towards success.

<sup>18</sup> Lindemann, Kristiina 2011. The changing perception of social position. – Towards a normal stratification order. Actual and perceived social stratification in post-socialist Estonia. Ed. by Saar, E. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Publishers House, p. 488.

<sup>19</sup> Kalmus, Vihalemm 2017, p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> Eesti Statistikaamet. Statistika andmebaas. <<https://www.stat.ee/>> (12.03.2018).

<sup>21</sup> Kalmus, Veronika; Masso, Anu; Lauristin, Marju 2017. Põlvkondade eristumise muutuvast ühiskonnas. – Eesti ühiskond kiirenevas ajas. Toim. Vihalemm, P.; Lauristin, M.; Kalmus, V.; Vihalemm, T. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, pp. 620–664. [Kalmus *et al.* 2017]

Life-course theory guides research on human lives by studying phenomena at the nexus of development trajectories and social change. According to Elder *et al*, life-course theory has five general principles; the two most relevant to our research are *the principle of Timing* and *the principle of Agency*<sup>22</sup>. In considering timing of life events, the developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioral patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life. Timing and sequencing, e.g. events taking place in life, should fit into what is seen as a norm in the society, so that life would continue without life-course interruptions. Agency implies that individuals construct their own life-course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance. The idea that a person should have agency over one's life-course has become a normative value in western cultures. Life-course theory serves us well in guiding our study of the sequence of life events. Being drafted into the military in the Estonian context can be viewed as personally having a hand in the sequencing of life events. The reason for this is that although Estonia practices a strict type of conscription where each person of age, barring health issues, should do their conscription service, the reality is that there are ways to postpone and delay service. The percentage of those conscripted from any given cohort in Estonia is currently up to 30%<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, in recent years, the average age of conscripts is slowly becoming younger as more of the cohort is taken in directly after gymnasium (at the ages of 18–19). This leads to greater age-stratification which influences the social systems<sup>24</sup> and means that, for example, similarly to schools, conscription is being molded into a more age specific institution. However, in their civilian lives, people have more freedom in planning their life, meaning that an increasing number of things have to be negotiated, planned and personally brought about which creates a lot of uncertainty in people's lives<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> **Elder, Glen H.; Kirkpatrick Johnson, Monica; Crosnoe, Robert** 2003. The Emergence and Development of Life-course Theory. – Handbook of the Life-Course, Vol II. Ed. by Shanahan, M. J.; Mortimer, J. T.; Kirkpatrick Johnson, M. New York: Springer US, pp. 3–19. [Elder *et al.* 2003]

<sup>23</sup> **Riigikaitse uus kava toob naised kaitsevähke**. – ERR, 2017.

<<https://www.err.ee/594677/riigikaitse-uus-kava-toob-naised-kaitsevake>> (02.04.2018).

<sup>24</sup> **Featherman, David L.; Sorensen, Annemette** 1983. Societal Transformation in Norway and Change in the Life-course Transition into Adulthood. – Acta Sociologica, Vol. 26 (2), pp. 105–126.

<sup>25</sup> **Beck, Beck-Gernsheim** 2002.

In spite of the rapid changes in society, in essence, the institution of the military has remained much the same, despite the structural changes militaries have undergone. Armed forces are still strongly hierarchical, with external unifiers such as uniforms, insignia and specific traditions. Military culture is also regarded as different from what is considered the norm in civilian society, being a culture that stresses such qualities as unity, discipline and sacrifice<sup>26</sup>. The military culture has a more collective and anti-individualistic perspective. The intensity with which new members of the armed forces are plunged into military culture is high enough that it is probably quite difficult to leave the military unchanged<sup>27</sup>. If the same holds true for the conscription service, then it also might apply to the difficulties conscripts meet in adapting to the military environment. Especially as, for the majority, conscription is not a choice that they would make if given the option of not serving. It is also clear that planning and making choices, within the particular limitations of their world, can have important consequences for future life trajectories<sup>28</sup>. In the context of conscription or joining the military voluntarily, the literature recognizes military service as one of two options: a positive turning-point or a disruptive event in the life-course<sup>29</sup>.

Another societal trend in established democracies is declining levels of civic engagement<sup>30</sup>. For this reason, but not only, the promotion of agency-stimulating aims both in school curriculums and in youth work has become more and more prevalent. It has become increasingly important to give voice to and also listen to what the youth have to say<sup>31</sup>. In Estonia, the younger generations are more active in spontaneous actions and in civil society networks, take active measures to manage their time better and are also multi-taskers to a much larger degree than the older generations<sup>32</sup>. This in turn

<sup>26</sup> **Rahbek-Clemmensen, Jon; Archer, Emerald M.; Barr, John; Belkin, Aaron; Guerrero, Mario; Hall, Cameron; Swain, Katie E. O.** 2012. Conceptualizing the civil-military gap: a research note. – *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 38 (4), pp. 669–678.

<sup>27</sup> **Grimell, Jan** 2015. A Transitional Narrative of Military Identity: Eris's Story. – *International Journal for Dialogical Science*, Vol. 9 (1), pp. 135–157.

<sup>28</sup> **Elder et al.** 2003, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> **Wilmoth, Janet M; London, Andrew S.** 2013. Life-course Perspectives on Military Service. An Introduction. – *Life-Course Perspectives on Military Service*. Ed. by Wilmoth, J. M.; London, A. S. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–19.

<sup>30</sup> **Ekman, Joakim; Amnå, Erik** 2012. Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology. – *Human Affairs*, Vol. 22 (3), p. 283.

<sup>31</sup> **Fleming, Jennie** 2013. Young People's Participation — Where Next? – *Children & Society*, Vol. 27 (6), pp. 484–495.

<sup>32</sup> **Kalmus et al.** 2017, p. 658.



means that the younger generations are increasingly more focused on gaining new experiences and skills or, in other words, building their own personal life-skills portfolio that can be used for obtaining a higher social status.

In this sense, at the individual level, conscription means a set of structural obligations that may contradict a young person's life plans and opportunities. Regarding defence models that use conscription, it is important to understand how compulsory military service fits into a young person's life plans in the deinstitutionalized societal context – where one is expected to demonstrate agency, which means that one has both the freedom as well as obligation to be actively in charge of one's life. This dissonance is vividly seen in the trepidation felt by those serving as conscripts.

### **3. Data and method**

#### **3.1. Survey data**

For this paper we use the data collected in 2016–2017 in the conscript survey of the EDF human resources research project. The data was collected using a questionnaire in electronic format (LimeSurvey) and the survey was carried out in all military units involved in training conscripts in Estonia. The survey was filled out three times (waves) during the conscription service: in the beginning, in the middle (after basic training) and at the end of the service. For the current analysis we used the answers to the question: what are the fears and problems that you have in connection with your conscription service? Namely, the answers to the open-ended question were used. The open-ended question where conscripts were asked about their fears related to conscription was preceded by a matrix format question, which included statements about difficulties in continuing education after the conscription period, concerns about the physical demands and stamina, not being able to endure the psychological stress, difficulties in continuing in the same job after their mandatory draft, worries about the economic well-being of their families, giving up hobbies and not being able to engage in free time activities. After having rated the difficulties on the scale from “Yes, this is the dominant concern that I have” to “No, this does not concern me at all”, the participants were given the chance in an open-ended (free text) question to bring up concerns that were not listed in the previous survey question. Despite the fact that conscripts had already answered the matrix question, about 10% seized the chance to either communicate their concerns or elaborate on their concerns in the open-ended question. As the data was more versatile and richer

than we had anticipated, we understood that the themes expressed and doubts raised deserved a more thorough analysis in order to understand the implications in the Estonian context today.

### 3.2. Analysis and operationalization of the method

Open-ended survey questions can prove to be challenging to analyze, as the answers can contain short concise remarks but also have more short narrating answers. It is clear, however, that these types of questions provide an opportunity to “vent” one’s frustrations<sup>33</sup>. As a result these types of answers can provide valuable insight into quantitative survey data. Furthermore, depending on the richness of the answers, they pose a separate data unit for deeper analysis with qualitative methods. This approach seemed especially prudent in our case, as it provided a more profound knowledge of the fears of conscripts. On the other hand, analyzing and contextualizing the qualitative data revealed a wider picture of the position of the defence forces and military in young people’s lives in a changing society.

We used a cross-case qualitative thematic analysis to analyze the answers to the open-ended questions. This type of analysis is conducted in order to find the recurring patterns and themes across all the collected data<sup>34</sup>. The data was assembled by compiling the answers from all the questionnaires where the open ended question concerning fears of conscripts was answered. We as researchers ascribe to the constructionist approach in research. That is, we believe that knowledge is created in interaction<sup>35</sup>, in this case, we the researchers interacting with the conscripts through their texts. The themes that we found are data-driven or inductive<sup>36</sup>, meaning that our starting point was not in a theoretical framework that we superimposed on the answers, but rather while discussing our results we started drawing on different theories to explain the thematic categories that we had determined in the corpus.

<sup>33</sup> **Jackson, Kristin M.; Trochim, William M. K.** 2002. Concept Mapping as an Alternative Approach for the Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Responses. – *Organizational Research Methods*, Vol. 5 (4), p. 308.

<sup>34</sup> **Braun, Virginia; Clarke, Victoria** 2006. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. – *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3 (2), p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> **Berger, Peter L.; Luckmann, Thomas** 1991. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Penguin.

<sup>36</sup> **Mayring, Philipp** 2000. Qualitative Content Analysis. – *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol. 1 (2). <<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1089>> (28.01.2018).

Therefore, we used latent thematic analysis<sup>37</sup>. Throughout the whole coding procedure we used multiple iterations in creating categories to strengthen internal code coherence and inter-coder verification (only the codes that both authors agreed upon were retained) to ensure transparency and reliability of coding<sup>38</sup>.

We started by using line-by-line coding<sup>39</sup> to determine initial codes and writing memos to notice the prevalence of different themes and how they are connected to each other. After that we collated codes into themes and sub-themes. This process resulted in the following thematic categories.

1. Personal changes and development:
  - a) Changes in personal life (including temporal and economic factors);
  - b) Changes in self-determination;
  - c) Changes in status (including loss of status through loss of skills; loss of social standing due to not having time to keep up social connection).
2. Adaptation to the military context:
  - a) Adaptation to military culture/mindset;
  - b) Adaptation to the physical context of the military.

## 4. Results

The overall impression regarding the fears of the conscripts shows that these are connected to the radical change of environment that is, moving from a civilian world into a military environment with its own rules and behavioral expectations. In the following paragraph we describe the results based on the categories and sub-categories that our qualitative analysis produced. It must be made clear that the military as a disruption of life-course is a self-evident category in this analysis, as we concentrated on the fears that are connected mostly to negative opinions and this must be taken into account throughout this article.

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<sup>37</sup> **Aronson, Jodi** 1995. A Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis. – *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 2 (1). <<https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2069&context=tqr/>> (12.04.2018).

<sup>38</sup> **Talves, Kairi; Kalmus, Veronika** 2015. Gendered Mediation of Children's Internet Use: A Keyhole for Looking into Changing Socialization Practices. – *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, Vol. 9 (1). <<https://cyberpsychology.eu/article/view/4332>> (28.01.2018).

<sup>39</sup> **Charmaz, Kathy** 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*, London: Sage Publications.

## 4.1. Personal changes and development

### 4.1.1. Changes in personal life

The fears related to changes in personal life can be characterized with the keyword ‘time’ and reflected by the assumptions of conscription being time-consuming, a waste of time, a loss of time, stopping time etc. In this sense, conscripts are afraid of being separated from life and losing time that would change their life during the conscription as well as affect their future. Part of the time-related fears are connected with temporality of the conscription period and concerns about the future through the perspective of time-consciousness. For example, in some cases conscription is perceived as cutting off a remarkable amount of time from life and significantly interrupting life plans.

*Time stops during conscription. We are effectively separated from the rest of the world and this is scary. The rest of the world moves on while we are here. The whole year will be lost. My life plans will be postponed. Some things I intended to do this year are cut off and these cannot be done in the following years.*

Another aspect of time-related fears was connected to the attitudes about conscription as a waste of time. Some conscripts describe it through the obligation to fulfill meaningless tasks putting the whole meaning of conscription under question, while the others see conscription as a loss and waste of time in their life.

*I am reluctant to study ‘the military’ and prepare for war and this is a waste of time for me.*

*It is a complete waste of time, as I am totally uninterested in warfare. The waste of time can only be alleviated if I could go to the Navy. I do not see any reason why I should participate in SBC (Soldiers Basic Course), instead I could directly go to marine’s basic course. You can’t force someone to be interested in something they are not.*

*Probably it will turn out to be 11 months of wasted time for me.*

*I am afraid the time goes slowly.*

Besides time-related issues, conscription may also change life from an economic perspective, especially if the conscript has a family or other obligations such as house loans etc.

*I will have difficulties paying my house loan.*

*One cannot afford a flat for 100€ per month. It is all on thin ice.*

#### **4.1.2. Changes in self-determination**

Fears about changes in self-determination are mostly reflected as loss of agency, loss of identity and loss of connection with life outside the confines of compulsory military service. These fears particularly show that conscription is perceived as a period that will lead to unwanted and in some ways even dangerous changes in the self and personal identity. One of the most serious fears about conscription is that it transforms people into something completely different and influences their minds in negative ways

*I will become more arrogant and aggressive.*

*I will start thinking like a soldier and civilian life will become distant.*

*Becoming an emotionless robot like all the others.*

*Becoming brain-washed.*

In addition to concerns about losing their own identity, conscripts are afraid that they will lose connections with civilian life and relationships with friends and relatives. Similar to the fear of losing their identity, the fear of losing social connections expresses the feelings of agony because of the unknown and the fear inducing situation of having been conscripted. In its totality, these feelings seem to take on a somewhat paralyzing form, especially in the beginning of the conscription.

*Conscription destroys the conscript's life and relationships out there.*

*They will forget me; they will forget that I ever even existed.*

*I am afraid that after 11 months, the people around me will not be the same anymore, because I cannot communicate with them or to be together.*

Changes in self-determination are also expressed by loss of personal freedom and the right to decide the course of one's own life. In some ways, it seems to accentuate the previously described reactions of losing identity and connections with civilian life

*I do not have my OWN life at all. There are orders all the time. They give us orders even when to eat. I think one should know himself if he wants to eat or not.*

*I cannot make plans about my life. It is done by others who are totally immature.*

*I will lose my mind, because I do not feel like a free man.*

### 4.1.3. Changes in status

The fear of losing the connection with civilian life is probably most vividly described in fears about changes in status. It clearly expresses the fear of losing the position that the conscripts felt they had achieved before they were conscripted. One of the most common fears is related to sports. Many sportsmen who have already managed to establish themselves in their chosen field are worried that they cannot keep up in competition, because they do not have the opportunities to practice as much as needed or to do specific exercises during the conscription period. There are also others who have acquired skills that need constant practice to at least maintain the level obtained, not to mention additional practice to advance in the chosen field.

*I am a professional surfer and if I do not practice for 11 months, I can just as well start taking it as an amateur.*

*It is impossible to practice the heavy lifting as much as I need it.*

*I am a musician, I need to practice a lot more than possible here. Also if I am not on the scene, I lose connections and opportunities. Much will be lost in a year, start all over again.*

Another aspect of losing status in civilian life is connected with relationships and especially with losing girlfriends or breaking up relationships. Many of these fears are taken as myths that seem to keep circling among young people and therefore feeding the negative image of conscription service.

*70% of guys are dumped by their girlfriends, I wouldn't want this to happen with me.*

*Conscription "helped" us to break up.*

*I do not have enough time to talk with my girlfriend and this may lead to a break-up. Most of my friends who have been in conscription have ended up like this.*

*I am afraid the connection with my partner is weakening. In some ways it is a kind of challenge for us, but it really scares me.*

Besides fears about what may happen with relationships during the conscription period that are in many ways based on the experiences and rumors of friends, there are also fears about everyday difficulties that the conscripts feel their relatives may have if they are not at home.

*I need to run a farm at home.*

*Serious health problems in my family + my parents broke up.*

*Crisis in my relationship with my wife, therefore the children are in a complicated situation.*

*It is a burden for my partner to get by on her own, while I am here on 'vacation'.*

Another pattern of losing status is related to work-life and especially to those who run a company or are self-employed. They are afraid that during the conscription their company will go bankrupt as they personally are not involved in it.

*I had to say 'no' to many good job offers, that's why I am extremely critical of conscription.*

*My company is almost bankrupt and all my plans have been postponed for a year. It is really difficult to operate something if you cannot get out of here.*

*I'll lose my career.*

A large segment of fears about personal development are related to education and problems with continuing with vocational school or university after the period of conscription. But what makes these fears more serious, is that many conscripts are worried that the conscription period has a negative influence on their motivation, skills and even intellectual capacities, because they feel that conscription does not support their development, which is particularly a problem for those who have graduated gymnasium just before entering conscription. They are used to a structured school system and the gap of stepping into a completely different environment produces many fears for them.

*Afraid that I cannot cope with my studies in the university after a break.*

*I cannot strengthen my knowledge and keep it up-to-date if I am here.*

*The loss of perspectives for self-development.*

*I will become intellectually inactive.*

*Degeneration.*

## 4.2. Adaptation to the military context

### 4.2.1. Adaptation to military culture/mindset

Problems with adaptation is one of the key issues that continues throughout different stages of conscription. It systematically shows that each next step in conscription means a lot of uncertainty and worries about coping with changes. It starts with the beginning of conscription, where most of the fears related to adaptation are connected with picking up on or adapting to the

military culture and mindset, while at the end of conscription, the opposite, re-adaptation with civilian life, is mentioned. Worries and fears about adaptation to the military mindset and culture mostly influence the first period of conscription. In the beginning of conscription, the stress and fear about not being able to settle in is causing strong reflections about individuality and personal attitudes towards the military. It vividly comes out in pronounced anti-war and anti-military attitudes in general.

*I am reluctant to study the military and prepare for war, the time is wasted.  
I do not want to learn how to kill people. I hate war, hate killing, and hate demolition.*

Similarly, in the beginning of conscription, the attitudes about the mindset in the military and conscription system obscure the positive image of conscription, and rather feed the fear related to adapting to the demands of discipline, commanders, everyday life and co-conscripts in conscription service.

*As there is not enough staff, some drill sergeants think they are gods.  
The moronic orders!  
You never know if you get to have R&R over the weekend. If some sergeant says that some men will stay in the barracks for some senseless reason... And this decision is made, let's say, on Friday afternoon, you have to cancel all your plans.  
Some conscripts are ACTUALLY sick, but nobody helps them, because nobody believes them.*

Although complications with settling back into civilian life at the end of conscription are expressed less strongly compared to difficulties expressed at the beginning of conscription, some problems related to stepping back into civilian life were mentioned. These are mostly generalized problems about changing the mindset and environment and fears of coping with these issues.

*It is difficult to re-adapt to civilian life.  
After conscription I do not have an income for a while, I cannot imagine how I can manage that.  
Difficult to restore my old life.*

#### **4.2.2. Adaptation to the physical context of the military**

Fears about adaptation to the physical context in conscription are related to the physical environment, which includes spending a lot of time in close contact with others, enduring a harsh and ascetic environment that is very



different from home, but also performing and fulfilling tasks that are either considered to be too challenging or not challenging enough. Additional pressures are felt due to the knowledge that others depend on one's skills and endurance.

*I don't want to be a burden, if I don't manage to carry all my stuff, others will have to pick up my slack.*

*I fail, everyone is punished.*

*Functions associated with life and thinking are suspended for 11 months, this may cause a problem once back on the civil street. Artificially restoring breathing and pulse may come as a shock.*

*Conscription should not be a form of imprisonment.*

*You have hardly woken up when there are already those living on your back, picking on others, breathing down your neck.*

Health issues are most often connected to insufficient or unaccustomed nutrition and recuperation possibilities or practices, but also sustaining injuries due to accidents on exercises either through one's own or someone else's inattentiveness or old injuries becoming more prominent again.

*Cannot get the food that I believe to be healthy and good for me, so the chances of becoming depleted both physically and mentally are quite big.*

*Presently I have a knee injury and I am afraid that it will just get more serious and that it'll be a problem for the rest of my life.*

*I am afraid that someone will do something stupid with the live-ammo and someone will get hurt.*

*Poor food and few opportunities for healthy exercise. You have to eat large portions fast, only three times a day (doctors suggest 5 times a day, smaller portions and needless to say no gorging), no snacks in-between, to boot you never get the protein needed. Can't do appropriate sports, instead you run on asphalt or walk with 30 kg on your back, so that after the conscript period everyone's knees are shot.*

*No time alone and recuperation.*

Regarding these answers, we noticed that the results differ to an extent between the beginning, middle and the end of conscription. In the first survey wave, in the beginning of the conscription service, the open-ended answers were most numerous and discussed the problems connected to conscription service but also insecurities clearly directed towards the civilian lives and how to pick up where one left off as easily as possible. Concerns were expressed particularly over the lack of contact with family, partners and social circles but also about continuing education after service, self-development and agency. The first answers vividly reflected the fear of a long period

that has to be spent in the service, and fear of wasting or losing valuable time. In the second survey wave problems discussed are directed mostly toward the immediate surroundings, the military environment and the people that they came into contact with. In the third wave the open-ended answers were the least numerous but were connected to the imminent release and reconnecting to civilian lives, economic concerns and uncertainty about the future.

## 5. Discussion

The results show that although the public strongly supports conscription, the fears of the conscripts reflect that the period is seen not as part of their life-course, but as an interruption in their normal life, with a strong emphasis on the aspect of losing one's place in society and missing out on social connections. The implications of this include high drop-out rates and avoidance. Timing and agency, the chance to take the initiative to decide when one wants to acquire a vocation, start university or start a family have become much more common and also expected of people. Normative life-course has become an elective life-course, but unlike many other options that people have, military conscription is seemingly unavoidable, yet there are several ways to postpone being drafted and about two thirds of every cohort is not drafted at all. Also, as research has shown, it is best to complete compulsory military service after gymnasium and before other obligations in life and so the age bracket when young people are drafted is becoming smaller. In addition, Estonia is gradually raising the number of conscripts from 3000 to 4000 a year and at the same time the birth cohorts are reaching an all-time low. These factors altogether produce a trend that moves counter to the de-institutionalization and individualization of life-course.

We will start our discussion from the aspect that most often finds its way into analysis and discussion when addressing conscript issues, namely that of adaptation to the military environment and culture. In his work with Finnish conscripts, Salo<sup>40</sup> points out that during the conscription period the socialization process is very intense, but the initial commitment to the military is the highest during the last weeks of basic training and then it starts dropping and, conceivably due to the relatively short period of conscription, does not

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<sup>40</sup> Salo, Mikael 2008. Determinants of Military Adjustment and Attrition during Finnish Conscription service. – Issue 21 of *Julkaisusarja 2—Tutkimuksia*. National Defence University, p. 5. <<http://tampub.uta.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/67908/978-951-44-7470-5.pdf;sequence=1>> (01.05.2017).

start climbing before the conscripts are released. The socialization begins already prior to conscription as “anticipatory socialization” with searching for information from websites and friends who already have experience with conscription. Our own research in Estonia supports that the adaptation to military environment and culture is higher among those who have personally had prior encounters with the military either at school or through youth organizations connected to the voluntary defence organization, the Defence League<sup>41</sup>. However, when we look at the problems that conscripts describe in connection with adaptation to the physical and cultural environment of the military, it is evident that the overall knowledge and preparedness for what awaits these young people in the military is relatively low. It is self-evident though that no matter how good the information that people have prior to their conscription, it will be stressful to get used to so many people sharing the same living space and the group dynamics will proceed through the stages of conflict and co-operation regardless. Ideally, one of the possible solutions is to give the young people the psychological and behavioral tools to cope with such stress. One of the sources of stress is also fear for one’s health, which can be damaged through unsuitable dietary options and training regimes; these are structural questions that can be addressed within the Defence Forces as much as possible. There is also fear of injury through accident. However, statistics indicate that the rate of accidents in the civilian population in that same age bracket is just as high as in the military. One of the reasons why accidents in the military might be feared as much as they are is that accidents happening in the military are widely publicized and can also be used as a propaganda tool by non-Estonian actors<sup>42</sup>.

On a more personal level and due to the more precise age-stratification that is now taking place with conscription it is also necessary to allow for personal adaptation to the military mind-set and culture. Arguably, it is not possible to project one specific linear timetable for transitioning from youth to adulthood, as different people might be at different stages of transition at the

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<sup>41</sup> **Kasearu, Kairi; Truusa, Tiia-Triin** 2018. Ajateenistusse asumise mustrid ja motiivid ning seos hoiakutega ajateenistuse jooksul. – Ajateenijate hoiakute, tervise ja käitumise muutumine ajateenistuse käigus. Ajateenijate kompleksuuringu 2016. aasta pilootuuringu tulemuste aruanne. Tartu: University of Tartu, National Institute for Health Development and ENDC, pp. 12–27. [**Kasearu, Truusa** 2018]

<sup>42</sup> **Kook, Urmet** 2018. Sputnik rakendas Eesti ajateenija tulistamisjuhtumi propagandavankri ette. – ERR. <<https://www.err.ee/689851/sputnik-rakendas-eesi-ajateenija-tulistamisjuhtumi-propagandavankri-ette>> (02.04.2018).

same age<sup>43</sup>. Nevertheless, it is more or less a period of intense identity formation both on personal and social levels, that is, the formation of personal identity and also social identity<sup>44</sup>. This would seem to indicate that, at least for some, role conflict is inevitable. This has to be taken into account when designing the socialization process, training conscripts and teaching future officers. The need to be taken seriously and for one's opinions to matter is also echoed in the data that we have. The young men conscripted today often start their service after gymnasium or sometimes also take a break from their vocational or university studies in order to perform their duty. The environment they come from is geared towards taking responsibility for one's own development, taking initiative and actively participating in one's education, and the difference between what is demanded of them as conscripts comes into stark contrast to what is expected of them in their civilian lives. Perhaps if conscripts were considered more from a future reservist aspect, as people who receive military training but are not turned into soldiers, it would help the defence forces to utilize and harness the potential of conscripts.

One of the most dominant categories was the aspect of time in conscription, which is easy to understand through the concept of social acceleration<sup>45</sup>, most notably the "contraction of the present". This means that the time period when action-orientated experiences and also expectations still matter is significantly reduced. Hence, the worries over the experiences and skills expiring. The more we can accelerate our ability, for example to go to different places, see new things, and learn new activities, the less incompatibility there is between the possibilities of experience we can realize in our lifetimes and the closer we come to having a truly 'fulfilled' life. The same acceleration in combination with the processes of individualization means that increasingly more aspects of our lives have to be constantly tended to. This also means tending to meaningful relationships, demands on investing time and the immediacy of responses has become common place. The urgency of the fear of losing contact with a girlfriend, with friends, but also with the family has become more pronounced in connection with social acceleration. Another aspect of contemporary life in Estonia, but also in other countries,

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<sup>43</sup> **Abel, Gillian Michelle; Fitzgerald, Lisa Jane** 2008. On a Fast-Track into Adulthood: An Exploration of Transitions into Adulthood for Street-Based Sex Workers in New Zealand. – *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 11 (4), pp. 361–376.

<sup>44</sup> **Erikson, Erik H.** 1959. *Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected Papers*. New York: International Universities Press.

<sup>45</sup> **Rosa, Hartmut** 2013. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 76. [Rosa 2013]

is the process of societal projectification, which notably affects people's lives. Life is conceived as a series of projects, the more they differ from one another, the more valuable they are<sup>46</sup>. It becomes imperative to pursue one or another activity, to always have a project or an idea, and always to be looking for something together with other people. Being successful in a projectified society is closely linked to being available, flexible and connected, while sacrificing lifelong plans, stable conditions and social predictability<sup>47</sup>. Invoking the project discourse thus implies not only the exclusion and suppression of non-project aspects, but also the disconnecting of everything that does not fit into the project management discourse<sup>48</sup>. Conscriptio service is seen as a kind of project by a select few, but this aspect of the society could be put to use when conceptualizing conscription in Estonia. At this time, the fears indicate that the conscript period is seen as missing out on projects, whereas it could be thought of in precisely the opposite manner. The threat of not being able to keep up with change and thus losing out on opportunities produces an immediate pressure to heighten the pace of life, or in other words, 'to stay current'<sup>49</sup>. This leads to a temporalization of life, to a perspective of one's own life as a project. Such temporalities increase people's feelings that they need to be available and present and keep up with the rapid changes of society. In such a context, being 'away' for a year might seem like an extremely long period of time and induce the feelings of being distant, isolated and excluded from an important part of life. At the same time, young people are increasingly incorporating a 'gap year'<sup>50</sup> into their lives, which means taking time off after graduating from high school and before starting their further education. The difference with conscription service really lies in the agency factor and also whether or not the experiences and skills acquired during the gap year fit the personal life-portfolio.

From the aspect of life-course sequencing and agency, we see that economically, as evidenced by our results and also by general statistics, active

<sup>46</sup> '55: W. F. Garrett-Petts|Open Engagement'.

<<http://openengagement.info/55-w-f-garrett-petts/>> (02.04.2018).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> **Chiapello, Eve; Fairclough, Norman** 2002. Understanding the New Management Ideology: A Transdisciplinary Contribution from Critical Discourse Analysis and New Sociology of Capitalism. – *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 13 (2), pp. 185–208.

<sup>49</sup> **Rosa** 2013, p. 308.

<sup>50</sup> **Martin, Andrew J.** 2010. Should students have a gap year? Motivation and performance factors relevant to time out after completing school. – *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 102 (3), pp. 561–576.

young people are motivated to start earning fairly early and also they become engaged in social projects that are often invested in as a part of one's personal life portfolio already before finishing high-school. The option that allows a person to begin conscription in Estonia at a time that is most convenient for the conscript is a welcome one, but it also shows that those opting for this choice are most often those who are fulfilling their duty so that they could get it out of the way<sup>51</sup> and not as an investment into their future. This means that conscription service is not understood as the first step of life-long service in the reserves or as a possible option for gaining social capital.

Finally, we would like to emphasize the intensity of the qualitative responses; some of them are very strongly emotional opinions signaling fairly high levels of frustration. Although qualitative responses were given by approximately 10% of survey responders, it is vital to remember that these were people who had already rated their fears answering a survey question. In that light and knowing that the military works to a great degree on the basis of unit cohesion and morale, then our findings, acknowledging the limitations, should not be taken lightly. One strongly under-motivated and circumstantially frustrated unit member presents a difficulty for the leaders and for the unit as a whole.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis shows that the fears of conscripts today are connected to the fear of losing one's place in life and missing out on opportunities while fulfilling their conscription duty.

The words and the intensity that young people use to describe their fears connected to compulsory military service indicate that we as a society will have to find a better fit between how the military know-how and skills are being taught to conscripts and consider how to utilize and incorporate the developmental and personal agency needs of contemporary conscripts. This also includes framing the skills and knowledge acquired during conscription as something that can be used in civilian lives, while not losing sight of the ultimate purpose of their training in the military. The aspects that will add to the compilation of one's personal life portfolio could be more clearly defined. Conscription is compulsory and as such it may be difficult to see it as a positive experience that can advance one's life goals. A discussion on

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<sup>51</sup> Kasearu, Truusa 2018, p. 20.

the purpose of military conscription in Estonian society is necessary, so that a form of consensus can be reached on the societal level. So far the discussion has been somewhat scarce as the societal agreement on the model of national defence has been fairly unanimous. At least an overwhelming majority sees the reserve army based model as the right model for Estonia. It is clear that the tensions between the goals of modern education and how to teach conscripts to become skilled and useful reserve members need to be addressed. Needless to say the issue of social justice is becoming increasingly difficult to address. A society striving for more equality will be hard pressed in justifying the inequality that arises when only 1/3 of the birth cohort ends up serving in the military and in the more distant future the question may arise why half of the society, namely women, do not have the same obligation as men to participate in national defence. It is time to discuss how to find the optimum between the needs of the military and of the civilian society, which in the end really are parts of the same entity: a prosperous and secure well-defended nation.

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