

Denmark adds women to military draft amid fears of conflict with Russia

BY ANNABELLE TIMSIT

Denmark has become one of the few countries in the world to conscript women for military service, as the country seeks to bolster its defense capabilities against the backdrop of rising tensions with Russia and increasing pressure from Washington for European nations to invest more in their own defense.

The new rules, which came into effect this week, mean women who turn 18 after July 1 will be eligible for potential military conscription as part of a lottery system — the same rules that apply to young men. The duration of mandatory military service will also be extended from four months to 11 months starting in 2026.

Denmark's defense ministry has described the move as one that ensures "full gender equality in conscription," a sentiment echoed by some Danish women who spoke to The Washington Post.

"I think it is unequal to only conscript men," said Rosa Collet, 16. Collet, who describes herself as a feminist, opposes military conscription as a whole but believes that where it exists, it should include both men and women.

Emily B. Rasmussen, 20, a student of physics and philosophy at Aalborg University in Denmark, also welcomed the move as "positive ... for the gender discussion."

"It's a huge leap in order to make women and men seem on the same level, [and] it also reduces the amount of people who do not want to join the military to be forced to," she added.

Julie Christiansen, 23, who also studies at Aalborg, agreed: "It's a great initiative because in Denmark there's a lot of talk about equality between men and women and I think that should apply to everything."

While Denmark scores relatively well on gender equality, ranking third in the European Union, the motivation to conscript women is not just ideological but also practical.

Col. Kenneth Strom, head of the Danish Armed Forces' conscription program, told the Associated Press the change was based on "the current security situa-



TOM LITTLE/REUTERS

Volunteers in the Danish Royal Life Guards rest during a training exercise in Hovelte, Denmark, on June 11. Before the country's new conscription rules, which took effect this week, women could volunteer to serve by entering into an agreement with the Armed Forces.

tion," with recruits potentially able to "take part in NATO collective deterrence," while an earlier defense agreement reached by the government and other political parties noted that a "worsening threat landscape" and recent crises including the coronavirus pandemic showed the need for conscripts to support the armed forces.

Gen. Michael W. Hyldgaard, Denmark's defense chief, said earlier this year that compulsory military service for women would "strengthen our ability to attract the most talented and motivated young Danes," adding that "the armed forces need all the combat power we can mobilize."

Not everyone affected by the change is happy.

Othilie Fauerskov Jorgensen, a

16-year-old student who, like Collet, will eventually be assessed for military service conscription under the new rules, said she was "very angry and sad" about the change in regulation and believes that military service should be a personal choice.

"I don't support it because it's something I don't see myself in," she wrote in texts to The Post, adding that she didn't feel that she, or most other women, were necessarily "suited for the military."

"I would rather be finished with my education than spending a year/months in military. I would rather get a job faster," she added.

Collet says the argument she often hears from people who oppose the new rules is that wom-

en's careers already tend to fall behind when they have children, and even in a country like Denmark, they are paid less and get promoted slower as a whole, so mandatory military service is seen as "setting us even farther back."

"Yes, there's still gender inequality in Denmark, the pay gap and still many things that keep women back," she acknowledges. "But we're also one of the countries that is most equal in terms of gender. ... I don't see why we should wait until everything's exactly equal to conscript women."

Under the updated Danish system, once men and women turn 18, they must be assessed for physical and mental fitness. If they are deemed fit to serve, they must draw numbers through a

lottery, and those numbers determine whether they are released from any military service obligation, or whether they might be called up to serve if the Armed Forces are not able to fill their quotas with enough volunteers. The first lottery under this new system will be held in 2026, the Defense Ministry said.

Before the change, women could volunteer to serve by entering into an agreement with the Armed Forces — and almost a quarter of 2024's military cohort consisted of female volunteers. But future generations of women will automatically be entered into the lottery if deemed eligible, on equal footing with men.

According to the Danish Armed Forces, nearly all military service spots have been filled by

volunteers in recent years. In the Danish defense agreement, political parties acknowledged that expanding conscription "will place greater demands on younger generations and may potentially reduce the level of voluntarism in conscription."

Denmark is not alone in widening its military conscription to include women: Norway and Sweden both did so in recent years, as European countries have felt an increased threat from Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

But globally, these countries are still outliers: In 2019, the Pew Research Center found that military conscription was rare — fewer than a third of countries had some form of active compulsory military service — and of the countries that Pew could determine had conscription, most drafted only men.

Polls show the Danish population favors expanding the country's defensive capabilities. An online poll of Danish adults conducted in May for the European Council on Foreign Relations found that 70 percent of adults supported increasing national defense spending.

In that same poll, around a third of respondents said they were very or somewhat worried about the use of nuclear weapons and the possibility of a third world war or a major European war beyond the war in Ukraine.

In addition to fears linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many Danes have also been wary of President Donald Trump's demands to acquire the Danish island of Greenland, and his refusal to rule out using the U.S. military to do so. "I think the whole Greenland kerfuffle ... maybe had the government thinking, what are we going to do as a really small country if war breaks out?" Collet said.

Meanwhile, Rasmussen, the university student, said she felt that Denmark, as a small country with a population of 6 million, had to be "somewhat equally prepared" for the possibility of war.

"We are very singled out because of our smaller scale and our more loose military standing," she said.