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THE TRUMPET CALL of NEOLIBERALISM

**The return of compulsory
military service in Europe and Italy**

REALIZZAZIONE A CURA DELL'**OSSERVATORIO CONTRO
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THE TRUMPET CALL OF NEOLIBERALISM

The return of compulsory military service in Europe and Italy

Reflecting on military recruitment systems means focusing on the social relationships that are mirrored in the structure of armies; historically, armies have indeed adopted various methods of recruitment, organisation, training and deployment, dictated not only by the type of war in which they will be engaged, but also by the relationship that the ruling classes establish with the masses of the subordinate classes.

Following the end of the Cold War, the majority of Western European countries abolished or suspended compulsory military service; the fall of the Berlin Wall had in fact changed the international landscape and thus the needs of the military sector: no longer mass armies (which were, moreover, extremely costly), but professional soldiers and masters of the West's technological superiority, soldiers capable of easily waging and winning the asymmetric wars through which NATO has gradually overthrown unwelcome governments.¹

But decades after the abolition of compulsory military service, the changing international situation has also brought about a transformation in the nature of warfare and, consequently, in the armies required to wage it; today, the number of troops deployed in the field is once again a decisive factor, and the abolition

¹ It is important to note that compulsory military service was associated with a state that made welfare one of the pillars of its political agenda; the era of neoliberalism, by contrast, coincides with an ever-increasing withdrawal of the state: the bond of duty between the nation and its citizens is broken, and a state that offers only crumbs is matched by a voluntary military service; the exchange no longer exists and military service becomes an individual choice corresponding to a well-paid profession, whilst the state, in perfect line with neoliberal cutbacks, frees itself from the huge costs involved in maintaining a mass army.

of conscription is therefore now a handicap for the warmongers. This is why, across Europe, there is renewed and insistent talk of reintroducing conscription – a highly topical issue that had been kept under wraps for many months but has recently emerged with the prominence it deserved from the outset.

In this context, the ruling classes now face a major structural political problem: how to reconnect citizens, abandoned by thirty years of neoliberalism, to a state and a ‘homeland’ that are perceived as being light-years away from their material needs and are indeed widely seen as enemies?

The ruling classes cannot and will not call into question the neoliberalism that has caused their estrangement from the masses of the subalterns whom they now need to carry on their war; for this reason, they are implementing a series of strategies with both material and ideological objectives to regain support and conceal how ‘national interests’ are in reality specific class interests.

The following is intended as a contribution to understanding the developments in Europe and Italy regarding the reinstatement of compulsory military service, as this is undoubtedly the ultimate goal of Europe’s warmongers. It is the duty of those who oppose war and wish to identify ways of preventing a return to mass conscription to understand the strategies governments are deploying to achieve this.

I will also attempt to show how the return of conscription is inextricably linked to the militarisation of schools, a phenomenon that is proving increasingly central and structural within the looming prospect of war, and, on the other hand, the European Parliament resolution of 2nd April 2025 “*Calls on the EU and its Member States to develop educational and awareness-raising programmes, particularly for young people, aimed at improving knowledge and facilitating debate on security, defence and the importance of the armed forces, and further calls for the development of train-the-trainer programmes and cooperation between defence institutions and universities in EU Member States, such as military courses, exercises and training activities involving role-play for civilian students*”²

² European Parliament resolution of 2 April 2025, articles 164 and 167

The militarisation of schools is the most important tool for strengthening the armed forces, and this is precisely what is happening in many European countries, including our own. The ruling classes are well aware that they must work deeply, at a cultural and ideological level, to be able to return to mass conscription; they will never present the return to conscription as a universal obligation, and even the recent statements by Minister Crosetto and Prime Minister Macron point in this direction: they will proceed in stages, declaring that no one intends to reintroduce conscription, swearing that they only wish to increase the number of volunteers, but in the meantime they will press ahead with strategies to achieve their structural objective, namely a return to compulsory conscription, because this is what the new form of warfare demands.

Ukraine and the nature of war

It is well known that military leaders learn how to wage war from war itself; and so, in the aftermath of the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, strategists, the defence industry and governments began to issue statements on the need to review recruitment models.

It is, in fact, the war in Ukraine that is dramatically showing the world that the nature of war has changed³: no longer the asymmetric wars that characterised the post-Berlin Wall era, but a symmetric war, that is, one in which the military forces on the ground are evenly matched (those of the US, NATO and Europe against those of Russia, as well as China, albeit still in the background); this shift in the nature of warfare implies new requirements regarding the organisation of the armies in the field: in asymmetric wars (where the vast majority of casualties were civilians), the focus was on elite, highly trained volunteers capable of managing the technological and military superiority of the

³In reality, although Western public opinion did not notice it, the situation had already changed with the war in Syria, when in 2014 the US-led international coalition found in its path the support that Russia provided to Assad, as well as, in a more defiladed way, China, which sent its warships. War changed face because the symmetric forces in the field no longer allowed a lightning operation, and in fact Assad, unlike what happened in other "rogue states," remained at the head of the country until December 2024.

forces involved; in symmetric warfare, by contrast, a large number of troops are required to be directly engaged on the ground (and indeed, in Ukraine, the now enormous death toll consists mainly of military personnel). The war in Ukraine, a conflict that has returned to the ground and is taking on the characteristics of trench warfare, has shown that today battles are no longer fought solely on the basis of technological superiority (which is undoubtedly still indispensable), but also on the number of soldiers deployed on the ground.

Hence the need to significantly increase troop numbers, given that volunteers are no longer sufficient and barracks are full of soldiers who are past the age of combat;⁴ virtually all European governments have recognised this need, yet they cannot simply revert to compulsory conscription, which would meet with strong opposition from public opinion; for this reason, the strategies they are implementing are both subtle and clever because, although their currently undeclared objective is undoubtedly a return to mass compulsory conscription,⁵ the intention is to do so gradually, avoiding opposition from the younger generation and public opinion in general.

From this perspective, it is particularly interesting to analyse the recruitment systems in European countries that have either never abolished conscription or have reintroduced it in recent times. On the other hand, these are the models that many European governments explicitly look to, precisely because they have allowed forms of compulsory recruitment to be tested in practice without encountering significant resistance, thereby overcoming the main obstacle facing European warmongers.

⁴ It is in this direction that the progressive extension of military service to women should be read, although this opening is presented as an achievement in gender equality. The armed forces never tire of emphasizing this aspect, forgetting that the values of the military world are intrinsically macho and patriarchal. It is, however, beyond doubt that this broadening makes a significant increase in enlistments possible.

⁵ From this point of view, this datum is sufficient: in 2011, the year compulsory service was abolished, the number of personnel in the German army was 240,000, falling to about 180,000 with the introduction of voluntary service. Today the declared objective is to reach 260,000 active soldiers by the mid-2030s. It is therefore very clear that the real objective is to reintroduce generalized compulsory conscription. The situation in Germany will be discussed more extensively later.

The Scandinavian model

In several countries, defence ministers, when announcing plans to reinstate conscription, cite the Scandinavian model; these are countries such as Norway, Sweden and Denmark which, at a time when almost all European countries were abandoning compulsory service, did not abolish conscription (or, as in the case of Sweden, reintroduced it after a few years); in other words, we are dealing with models that have concretely demonstrated the possibility of requiring young people to perform military service without this arousing strong opposition. The mechanism is described by the oxymoron ‘voluntary obligation’ because it aims to increase the number of recruits whilst making its compulsory nature as imperceptible as possible. The systems in the three countries differ slightly, but what we wish to focus on here are their common features and the objectives they fix.

A first, decisive element peculiar to the Scandinavian model is that, although the obligation applies to the entire population, the number of young people actually enlisted is reduced to minimal percentages; this is made possible by the pathways leading to conscription.

In **Norway**, where conscription has never been abolished (in 2013 it was extended to include women as well), all citizens upon reaching the age of 18 receive a questionnaire to complete, providing a range of details regarding their physical and mental health and whether or not they wish to serve in the armed forces. From the entire conscription cohort, based on their responses, approximately 30% are selected to proceed to a second stage focusing on medical examinations and aptitude tests; everyone is awarded a score from 1 to 9, on the basis of which approximately 15–18% of the entire conscription cohort is selected: these are the young people who will actually undergo training⁶, and being selected from that 15–18% is a matter of prestige, as well as being a significant addition to one’s personal CV . In recent years, the Norwegian army

⁶ Conscription lasts 19 months, one of the longest service periods, unpaid. At the end of service, they may opt either for a military career or for a return to civilian society, but until the age of 44 they will be part of the military reserve, which includes periodic training.

has not needed to recruit soldiers beyond those who voluntarily declare their willingness to serve; however, these numbers are set to rise because the Norwegian government has recently committed to a massive investment in the defence sector (51 billion from 2024 to 2036), which involves not only upgrading all weapon systems but also increasing the number of soldiers. When this will become a reality, the state has already put in place the mechanism to select even those who do not volunteer to serve in the army.

In **Sweden**, compulsory military service was abolished in 2010 and reinstated in 2017 (including for women), drawing inspiration from the Norwegian model: all citizens aged 18 are required to complete a very detailed questionnaire in which they are also asked to state their views on the possibility of performing military service. Around 13% of the entire conscription cohort is selected; following further screening, this figure drops to 7–8%, who will be required to undertake periodic call-up periods until the age of 47. In Sweden, too, there have in fact been enough volunteers so far, but things could change in the face of new requirements; indeed, Sweden also plans to increase the number of citizens to be conscripted, who will already be selected based on the results of the questionnaire.

In **Denmark**, where conscription has never been abolished or suspended, all citizens aged 18 are required to attend the ‘Defence Day’, where opportunities for a military career are presented; everyone undergoes a medical fitness assessment that divides them into three categories: fit, partially fit or unfit; the latter are rejected, whilst the first two take part in a lottery that assigns them a number⁷: the first 8,000 are trained (with priority given to volunteers), the others will not be called up in peacetime; in fact, in Denmark, 7–8% of each conscription cohort actually undertake military service. It should also be noted that in January 2024 a law was passed which will come into force in 2026; in

⁷ The lottery system is not new in recruitment mechanisms. The Royal Italian Army made abundant use of it after the Unification of Italy, partly because the new state was not yet able to economically sustain an overly large army. To recall one of the most famous examples, consider the lottery system used by the United States for the Vietnam War: the first drawing took place live on television on 1 December 1969, and video traces exist online. The lottery allows the state to save money compared with a conscript army and at the same time to show impartiality in the choice of who will be called to fight.

addition to extending compulsory service to women, it has increased the period of compulsory service from 4 to 11 months, after which servicemen are assigned to a reserve that can be mobilised if necessary. In fact, up to now, even in Denmark, it has been sufficient to train only those who have expressed a desire to join the armed forces, but the number seems set to increase (there is talk of tripling the number) and the result of the lottery will make it possible to identify those who are not volunteers.

As shown, the percentages of conscripts are small (7–8% in Sweden and Denmark, 15–18% in Norway) and the most important objective of these recruitment models is likely to be to fragment and divide the potential opposition: not everyone will be conscripted, but only a small percentage of those deemed fit (through scoring or lottery); in this way, those who are excluded (and at present this will be the majority) will have no reason to show solidarity with those who will be obliged to perform military service. This is certainly the main factor leading European governments to view the Scandinavian model with such interest: these mechanisms allow the issue of conscription to be reopened, even from a cultural perspective, but they do so in a way that is initially mild and therefore likely to be tolerated by national public opinion; once the groundwork has been laid, it will be possible to extend the scheme to the entire young population.

A second common feature of the Scandinavian model, albeit in different forms, is the option to choose civilian service⁸: this too is a highly ideological tool, aimed at reducing resistance to compulsory service. But it is essential to highlight the intrinsic link between contemporary civilian service and militarisation: we are no longer dealing with the pacifist dimension that the choice of conscientious objection once had; on the contrary, today it is an integral and constitutive part of future war scenarios. It is therefore necessary in

⁸ In Denmark, if one is drawn by lot and does not want to perform military service, it is possible to opt for civilian service, usually longer: military service ranges from 4 to 12 months, civilian service from 8 to 12. It is also possible to perform unarmed military service in logistics, administration, health care, and so on. In Norway, if selected, it is even possible to refuse both military and civilian service, although the state reserves the right, in case of need, to call people up for enlistment, since from a legal standpoint the obligation exists. In Sweden, the obligation of "total defence" exists, so all citizens must serve the state, either under arms or through civilian service.

this regard to consider the concept of 'total defence': this involves preparing the whole of society to mobilise in the event of war, and thus every single citizen must be able to manage the 'front line', each according to their own skills and role in society. A programme with practical aims in the event of conflict, but also one of ideological penetration: war must be kept firmly in mind by all citizens in the nearest future, and the younger generations are the ones most in the firing line, because it will be they, above all, who will have to make themselves available for the warmongers' projects.⁹ The clear distinction between 'military' and 'civilian' thus breaks down because the civilian service is fully embedded within a process of total militarisation of society and can no longer be conceived as 'conscientious objection'. From this perspective, it is also important to bear in mind how the strategy of total defence, more pertinent to the military sphere, aligns and intersects with that of 'resilience'—a civilian programme of intense ideological penetration among European populations who must prepare for war with survival kits right from within their own homes and, above all, internalise the propaganda of European warmongers.¹⁰

⁹ The concept of total defence was born after the Second World War, following the experience of "total war" represented by that conflict, in small states such as Switzerland, Sweden, Finland and Israel, which, because of their small populations, envisaged the need to mobilize the whole of society in case of war. The concept of "total defence" then expanded and became a central element in European rearmament programmes: the point is to prepare populations to withstand the shock of war and lead them to continue supporting the institutions and the system that created it. Total defence is not only a military programme but also a political one, because it aims to rally the subordinate classes around discredited Western institutions, uniting them against the "enemy" in order to displace outward the social and political tensions that neoliberalism has structurally created.

¹⁰ In this regard, think of the pamphlet distributed to all households in Sweden with instructions in case of war. Similar pamphlets have already been produced in other countries, such as Norway, Finland and Denmark, and the European Commission on 26 March 2025 requested all Member States to equip themselves with instruments of this kind. The most recent declaration, in November 2025, is that of Minister Crosetto contained in the "informal" document "Countering Hybrid War: An Active Strategy," in which the need to actively take war into cyberspace becomes the occasion to develop a capillary propaganda according to which the posture of the European subordinate masses toward war and their own ruling classes is due not so much to the social butchery of decades of fierce neoliberalism, but to the propaganda of the adversary. These documents must be noted and studied thoroughly because they prefigure the propagandistic scenario within which we will have to operate; but it is not possible to address this analysis here.

But in my view, the key factor that the three countries have in common is the requirement for young people of conscription age to undergo a process designed to compile a comprehensive register of the youth population and draw up lists based on individual characteristics (physical, psychological, already acquired skills, etc.). It is important to note that it is precisely at this initial stage that the harshest penalties are imposed: those who fail to comply with this obligation are in fact subject to fines of varying severity (from a few hundred euros in Sweden to a maximum of around 2,000 euros in Norway) and, in the event of a repeat offence, may even be punished with imprisonment (from 3 to 6 months depending on the country); the police may also use force to compel those who refuse to attend or complete the questionnaire (in Sweden and Norway, the police may, by law, ‘accompany’ young people for what is known as ‘assisted completion’). It is this initial phase that constitutes a genuine conscription obligation: failure to complete the questionnaire or to attend the day dedicated to the armed forces is regarded by the law as a failure to comply with compulsory conscription. Such severe penalties for what is essentially a marginal obligation must be carefully assessed: what is, in fact, the aim of this mass registration? There are essentially two objectives: on the one hand, to reach as wide an audience as possible to present all the advantages of a military career and thus increase the number of volunteers; on the other, to have data on the entire population at their disposal, which may prove useful if and when it becomes necessary to increase troop numbers. The military high command is laying the groundwork to support a possible mass mobilisation for which both data and infrastructure are currently lacking, and mass registration is a step in this direction.

Another equally important aspect to bear in mind in this discussion is that the structural element of these ‘voluntary-compulsory’ armies is the establishment or strengthening of an auxiliary reserve, composed mainly of soldiers with basic training to be deployed in all those sectors not directly involved on the front lines. And the auxiliary reserve is well suited to this element of ‘light conscription’: basic training is generally much shorter (a few months), requires even shorter periodic call-ups, and is proposed as time-limited (the obligation to attend call-ups is restricted to a few years following the completion of training);

these are all characteristics that could make the reintroduction of compulsory military service more acceptable. The auxiliary reserve, on the other hand, fits well with the concept of ‘total defence’: it is precisely this ‘light availability’ of a large number of citizens that the contemporary form of warfare requires.

All the mechanisms analysed so far pragmatically aim at concrete objectives (increasing troop numbers and the widespread collection of data in preparation for mass mobilisations), but together they serve a strong ideological function that unhesitatingly seeks to ‘Israelise’ societies with a European twist: they cannot, of course, rely on compulsory military service based on the Israeli model (three years for men and two for women, with no possibility of conscientious objection), but they attempt to build the same pervasive presence that the military has in Israeli society; the ‘educational’ impact of military service or militarised civilian service, the deployment of a strategy of total defence and resilience across the entire population, all aim to shape men and women who not only accept war but are ready to actively support it. From this perspective, we must focus on the central role played in all this by the militarisation of schools: even in Scandinavian countries, we are witnessing specific government interventions in the education sector, which have implemented this kind of penetration into the educational sphere in recent years; it is interesting to note that measures in the school sector are chronologically more recent developments: in this regard, the Scandinavian countries are not, in fact, the model to follow; rather, like many other European countries, they too have recently introduced forms of military education in schools¹¹; but this will be discussed in greater detail when we turn to the analysis of the Baltic states.

I believe it is now clear why the Scandinavian model is of interest to countries considering the reintroduction of conscription; there are many aspects on which this model is based: a legally mandatory questionnaire, heavy penalties for ‘draft

¹¹ In Sweden, from autumn 2025, it is compulsory for upper-secondary students to follow a course on "total defence" covering topics such as the role of national defence, international law, the role of NATO, and preparedness for crisis or war. All this obviously also entails the need to train teachers to carry out this curriculum change in classrooms. In Norway and Denmark too, governments have recently intervened in schools. In Denmark, the reference rules were approved in 2023, although at the moment there is no obligation; nevertheless, strong pressure is being registered from the Ministry of Education to implement this type of course.

dodgers’, a comprehensive registration of the entire population with a view to its future deployment for ‘total defence’, the ‘freedom’ to choose a highly militarised form of civilian service, and a strengthening of the auxiliary reserve are all elements that have been tested in practice to make public opinions “swallow” a return to conscription – initially on a partial basis – with a view to eventually reintroducing it as a mass obligation should the need arise. And it is undoubtedly this mix of voluntary and compulsory service that is attracting the interest of European governments; indeed, the countries that have recently moved towards reintroducing conscription have drawn heavily on the Scandinavian model.

The Baltic states

It is highly instructive to analyse what is happening in the Baltic states, as these are territories that have recently intervened in their recruitment systems and concretely show us the strategy being adopted by warmongers when they decide to legislate on the issue of recruitment. In these territories, geographical proximity to Russia fuels nationalism and a perception of danger, factors that lead to an increase in enlistments.

The trend towards drafting conscription laws modelled on the Scandinavian system is clear: the most recent reform is that of Latvia, which had suspended compulsory service in 2007 (upon joining NATO) and reintroduced it in 2023: conscription is compulsory for males and, if there are not enough volunteers, conscripts are selected by lottery using a system very similar to the Danish one; furthermore, it is always possible to opt for civilian service which, in accordance with the principles of total defence, falls under the Ministry of Defence.

It is worth noting that, in parallel and simultaneously with the process of reintroducing conscription, **Latvia** is taking significant steps to militarise the education system: in fact, military education has been introduced as a compulsory subject in secondary schools (*‘National defence education’*), with two to three hours per week (map reading, compass use, navigation, camouflage, knowledge of the national armed forces); these lessons have been integrated

with physical education and civic education, and the primary objective of this requirement—which has been achieved—is to increase the number of volunteers: the younger generations are bombarded with attractive career prospects, and even those who do not choose military careers will have the values of defence instilled in them; schools are a prime target for ideological indoctrination: intervening in schools effectively means influencing families – and thus society as a whole – through children.

In February 2015, **Lithuania**, which had abolished conscription in 2008, decided to reintroduce it, extending it to women as well; however, in 2024, the Lithuanian parliament intervened again, introducing a registration requirement for 17-year-old boys and backdating the option to defer service to the age of 22 (previously it was up to 26); Furthermore, it has become compulsory for everyone to attend a medical examination, although only those selected by lottery (following the Danish model) will be obliged to perform military service or, alternatively, civilian service; however, the latter – in addition to being managed directly by the Ministry of Defence – is, as a punitive measure, three months longer (subsequently, everyone will join either the military or civilian reserve). In 2024, the Lithuanian government also intervened significantly in the militarisation of schools by introducing military culture courses (optional, approximately two hours a week with both theoretical and practical lessons such as marching, map reading, air rifle shooting, etc.). Those who opt for these courses will enjoy benefits such as a reduction in the length of their military service; the fact that compulsory registration for military service has been brought forward to the age of 17 has made the link between school and the defence sector more ‘natural’.

This therefore represents the transposition of the Scandinavian model into the Baltic region, and it must be strongly emphasised that the countries which have reintroduced conscription have acted legislatively in perfect tandem towards the militarisation of schools: this is, in fact, a structural element necessary for the restoration of conscription, and this is indeed what is happening in Germany and Poland, two countries where work is proceeding apace towards the return of mass conscription.

Germany and Poland

The dynamics we are analysing have found their most significant and worrying manifestation in Germany: at the end of August 2025, the federal government approved a bill that must now go through the parliamentary process and which, in November 2025, saw a political agreement between the CDU and the SPD. The law is clearly modelled on the Scandinavian system and, in fact, provides (for male citizens only, for women, participation is voluntary) for the obligation, from 1 January 2026, to complete a questionnaire and, from July 2027, to attend a medical examination; By introducing these obligations, German warmongers expect to see an increase in volunteers, but if the target numbers are not met, the law reserves the right to reintroduce forms of conscription through the Danish lottery system.¹² Various incentives are also included for those who choose to enlist: in addition to a significant pay rise (+33%, from €1,500 to €2,300 per month), provisions include educational credits, training that can also be used in civilian life (such as language courses, technical and vocational training) and even support for obtaining the driving licence. The stated aim is to reach 260,000 active soldiers by mid-2030; there are currently around 180,000, and there were 250,000 when service was compulsory, so it is clear that the objective is to return to mass conscription, even if this, as we know, must be done gradually. The other clear objective for Germany is to have a very large auxiliary reserve (200,000 reservists are indicated for Germany) and, in fact, the law intervenes to strengthen this, making it much more structured and integrated with the active forces. Still following the Scandinavian model of ‘total defence’, the law aims to strengthen civilian service with the objective of involving 100,000 young people a year. It is also significant that over the last year,

¹² The bill sets annual recruitment targets for the new voluntary system, which should increase from 20,000 in 2026 to 38,000 in 2030. If these numbers are not reached, the government reserves the right, by law, to opt for the reintroduction of compulsory conscription. In the meantime, however, the usual complete registration of the young population will take place, a registration indispensable for recruitment planning.

even prior to this law, the number of new recruits had risen (+28%), an increase attributable to a massive outreach programme targeting young people, starting in schools. We must, in fact, emphasise once again that the law reinstating conscription in Germany goes hand in hand with the increasing militarisation of schools: the German Interior Minister has proposed introducing two hours into school curricula to prepare young people for future scenarios of crisis and war; yet even today, the military's presence in German schools is palpable and on the rise: soldiers deliver lessons, workshops and lectures, and also provide direct funding to schools and certain educational activities; Furthermore, in Germany, voluntary enlistment is possible from the age of 17, and the younger the target audience in schools, the more this leads to a 'natural' increase in volunteers.¹³

The other European country to keep under particular observation is **Poland** because here, given its geographical position, regulations are being introduced that must be seen as trials of what might also happen in Western countries. In Poland, compulsory service was suspended in 2009 and, although there is persistent talk of its reintroduction, the government is currently choosing a different path: on 7 March 2025, the Prime Minister announced a draft bill providing for compulsory military training for all adult men (physical and weapons training, first aid, communications, etc.), which, however, will be carried out for a very short period (two weeks and then one week per year); on the other hand, Poland's target is even more ambitious than Germany's, aiming for as many as 500,000. In Poland too, as in Germany, the number of volunteers has risen significantly, partly because the 'Homeland Defence Act' passed in the spring of 2022 not only made military service more attractive to young people (20% pay rises, employment benefits, etc.), but above all this law has introduced educational programmes run in conjunction with the armed forces in schools and universities: these include various activities, ranging from practical ones (military-style physical training, emergency simulations involving chemical attacks, orienteering exercises, basic survival techniques) to 'cultural' activities (the history of Poland and its armed forces, participation in commemorative ceremonies, etc.); some of these activities have become compulsory for all schools (particularly those of a cultural nature and those relating to emergency

¹³ See the report "Shadow Report Child Soldiers 2020 - Germany"

management), but the same law has also provided for the possibility of establishing, within the secondary school curriculum (it is up to the schools to decide whether or not to implement them), actual ‘military classes’ in which subjects such as civic education, physical education and history are taught from a military education perspective. Poland is also a testing ground for the practical application of ‘total defence’ concepts: the ‘*In Readiness*’ programme was presented in early November 2025, which plans to train as many as 400,000 citizens by 2026 who will be able to choose, on a voluntary basis, whether to undertake courses in basic survival, cybersecurity, first aid or basic training; these are not military personnel, but civilians to be “turned into fully-fledged soldiers in the event of conflict”, as Prime Minister Tusk stated.¹⁴

It will be very interesting to follow developments in the Polish approach and, above all, the German one, given the massive investments Germany has announced for rearmament and the central role the country plays in Europe.

Both the Baltic states and Germany and Poland clearly demonstrate that the militarisation of educational institutions is an inevitable step for all governments reintroducing compulsory military service; schools are essential to the warmongers’ plans, who are indeed intervening systematically in this sector: the recruitment pool lies within schools, and that is where the ground must be prepared, including from an ideological perspective.

This is the main reason behind the ‘success’ that the Observatory against the Militarisation of Schools and Universities continues to enjoy in Italy, as it has managed to position itself in advance in a strategic location for the adversary; in Italy, in fact, the processes we are analysing are still in their infancy, and the struggle against the militarisation of education can count on a time advantage over the adversary who, like all European warmongers, is moving towards the reintroduction of conscription.

The situation in Italy *Before June 2026

¹⁴ "Il Manifesto", 8 November 2025

In Italy, too, there is no shortage of persistent calls for an increase in troop numbers: both Minister Crosetto and Chief of Defence Staff Cavo Dragone have repeatedly told the press that the Italian military is insufficient to meet new challenges¹⁵ and at every hearing before the Defence Committees, senior officers of the armed forces never fail to reiterate this point. In Italy, too, therefore, the suspension of conscription is now proving to be a handicap for the ruling classes, who are in fact gearing up, like other European governments, to reintroduce some form of compulsory military service.

The Meloni government's international political stance and, above all, the massive demonstrations sparked by the 22 September strike make it difficult for our warmongers to take a clear stand in favour of reinstating conscription; nevertheless, the domestic political class has already laid the groundwork, including from a regulatory perspective, to achieve the same results.

The first concrete measure was approved on 5 August 2022 (Law No. 119) when the then Draghi government decided to postpone by 10 years the reduction in military personnel that was due to take effect from 2023; however, the measure also contains delegated powers to the government, including¹⁶ the power to establish a state auxiliary reserve comprising 10,000 personnel.¹⁷ It is important to note that Law 119 was passed by all political parties (there were zero votes against and only three abstentions from entirely minor parties), including those that are now seeking electoral support by riding the wave of the massive movement that has emerged in the country in support of Gaza. The decree in question clarifies that the auxiliary reserve may be deployed in its military capacity “*only in times of war or serious international crisis*”¹⁸, whilst in its

¹⁵ The statements of our defence minister and of high-ranking military officials fluctuate, indicating a necessary increase placed between 30,000 and 40,000 additional soldiers.

¹⁶ Article 4, paragraph 9.

¹⁷ Italy is one of those countries that, unlike others, did not establish a state auxiliary reserve at the moment when compulsory conscription was dismantled

¹⁸ These are the cases provided for by article 887, paragraph 2, of the code referred to in Legislative Decree no. 66 of 2010.

civilian capacity it may be deployed in the event of “*a declaration of a state of emergency at national level*”¹⁹;

Thus, in Italy too, as in other countries, there is a clear link between military service and the civilian sector. To complete the picture of this measure, it should be noted that Law 201/2023 was published in the Official Gazette on 14 November 2023; amongst other things, this law postpones by 24 months the government’s mandate to adopt the decree-law. The next deadline is therefore set for December 2025.

Whilst the government proceeded with the postponements, three proposals were tabled in Parliament: the Lega with Minardo on the auxiliary reserve²⁰, the PD with Graziano-Fassino on the civilian reserve²¹ and Zoffili (also of the Lega) on the return of conscription²². Despite the media chatter surrounding political manoeuvring, the three proposals are perfectly compatible and serve the interests of each party. The government would find it difficult to proceed by decree on an issue such as the state’s auxiliary reserve, and indeed Mr Minardo has publicly invited the PD to merge the auxiliary reserve bill with that of the civil reserve in committee, a course of action that would relieve the government of the need to resort to a decree-law and simultaneously allow it to present a politically agreed choice to the public. This has sparked a surreal row in the press: Angelo Bonelli of the AVS, forgetting his party’s vote in favour of Law 119 (which delegated the state auxiliary reserve to the government in terms practically identical to those of the Minardo bill), declared: “*The bill to establish a military reserve of 10,000 reservists is yet another confirmation of the Melonian right’s desire to transform Italy into a militarised country, extending military culture to civil society as well. Defence Committee Chairman*

¹⁹ The reference is to article 24 of the Civil Protection Code, Legislative Decree no. 1 of 2 January 2018. The labile boundaries of the definition of a national state of emergency as provided for by article 7 of Legislative Decree no. 1 of 2 January 2018 are worrying and must be watched carefully; keep in mind, for example, that the state of emergency was declared to manage migrant landings.

²⁰ Bill C. 1744, "Establishment of the auxiliary reserve of the Armed Forces of the State".

²¹ C. 1740, "Delegation to the Government for the establishment of the State Auxiliary Reserve for the conduct of health and social-assistance rescue operations".

²² Zoffili bill C. 1873, "Establishment of universal territorial military and civilian service and delegation to the Government for its regulation."

Minardo's proposal is an ideological project".²³ Even more disingenuous is the PD with Graziano, who, in an attempt to defend his bill, stated: *'The bill I presented a year and a half ago has no military structure [...] it is a project designed to enhance, in civil and social-health terms, and support the logistical and welfare activities of the Red Cross'*;²⁴ It is a pity for Graziano that his bill is steeped in militarism: in fact, his proposal aims to remilitarise the Red Cross²⁵ and indeed to bring together within it various sectors of the voluntary sector active in Italy, all strictly placed under military control; the PD's bill aims, in fact, to establish a civilian State Auxiliary Reserve *"to operate in support of the Armed Forces, the Police Forces and the entire civil protection system"*; and to leave no room for doubt, the proposal stipulates that *"the State Auxiliary Reserve shall consist of operational units under the command of the highest military authority within each region"*; not only that, but the military would have direct contact with these volunteer citizens, as the assessment of their skills would be carried out *"in the facilities designated for recruitment into the Armed Forces"*.

It is clear, particularly in light of an analysis of the mechanisms in place in other European countries, that the Minardo and Graziano bills are deeply intertwined and, indeed, mutually reinforcing; and should there still be any doubts, it is worth examining the Zoffili bill as well, which is currently the piece of legislation most directly concerned with the reinstatement of compulsory military service in Italy: it is envisaged that all young people, male and female, aged between 18 and 26, will be required to serve for six months, choosing between military service and civilian service; once the six months are up, they will join the State Auxiliary Reserve (Lega bill) or the State Civil Reserve (PD bill) respectively, in accordance with that principle of interconnection between military and civilian service which is the backbone of the return of conscription across Europe and which forms part of the 'total defence' strategy.

²³ RaiNews, 18 June 2025.

²⁴ Il Fatto Quotidiano, 19 June 2025

²⁵ Legislative Decree no. 178 of 28 September 2012 transformed the Italian Red Cross Association from a public body into a legal person under private law, at the same time initiating the demilitarization and dissolution of the Military Corps of the Red Cross.

And it is precisely in these closely intertwined legislative proposals that the absolute compatibility between the government and the opposition in Italy becomes evident, both of which are committed to the total militarisation of our society, a scenario that serves the interests of the Italian and international ruling classes, who at this historical juncture need our young people and are seeking suitable ways to compel them to return to compulsory military service without this encountering insurmountable resistance in public opinion.

What also emerges (though not exclusively) from this analysis is that war is not a matter of political manoeuvring, but a structural tendency of the ruling classes, whose interests are today represented in our Parliament by all the political forces sitting there, albeit with some slight variations in political hue.

Conclusions and guidelines for the struggle

In light of what is happening in various European countries and the developments in our Parliament, there is no doubt that Italy too will see some form of reintroduction of conscription; Minister Crosetto has announced that he will present his proposal to Parliament and has strongly emphasised that the decision must be taken in the democratically designated forums; Crosetto is, in fact, well aware that the large-scale mobilisations for Palestine, sparked by the success of the grassroots trade union strike on 22 September—which emerged from the grassroots and was detached from representative parties and trade unions (and was all the stronger for it)—will slow down this process. However, we must not forget that this is a structural necessity of the current phase of Italian and European capitalism.

The return of conscription will be pursued with ‘lightness’, tactical intelligence and extreme attention to public opinion. Precisely for this reason, we must be prepared and immediately focus on certain tactical lines that will enable us to be ready to face this offensive; in other words, we must once again exploit to our advantage the delays the Italian government is currently facing and immediately begin to bring the issue to the attention of the most vigilant and organised section of the country.

First and foremost, we must abandon the traditional route of conscientious objection: whilst this has been (and remains, in countries where traditional compulsory conscription persists) a very important tool for rejecting compulsory military service, today civil service will be the Trojan horse they use to reintroduce military conscription alongside it; it is precisely this choice that will allow the return to compulsory military service to go unnoticed and, at the same time, increase the size of the military; civil service will then be closely linked to the military sphere, in what is termed ‘total defence’, and we must therefore make it clear today that we reject any form of compulsory service for our young people, because we do not want them to be subjected to either military service or a militarised form of civil service. And from this perspective, we must pay attention to the criminalisation of youth unrest, a orchestrated barrage of news stories aimed at creating the perception of a repressive need for ‘re-education’ (be it military or civilian) that is beneficial to young people and the community as a whole. It is precisely those very same parties, of whatever political persuasion, which for decades have abandoned the suburbs, which have failed to implement youth policies and which have dismantled the state school system, that will be the ones to propose coercive measures to resolve problems that are, in fact, purely political and social in nature.

The second problem we will face will be countering the tool they choose (a widespread questionnaire, compulsory dedicated days, etc.) to proceed with mass registration, through which they will have access to data on the entire youth population—data that could prove useful should the need arise for broader mobilisation. As is the case in other European countries, the tool will be as ‘light-handed’ as possible in terms of enforcement, yet severe towards those who refuse; it will not be easy to organise a mass refusal of these tools: why risk hefty fines or even criminal proceedings if one ‘merely’ has to fill in a questionnaire? It is here, at this very level, that we must organise conscientious objection and revive the long tradition of struggle that has developed in our country over the past decades through this very means. Much of this battle will depend on the level of political maturity among young people, and especially the very young, who have played a leading role in the protests against the genocide in Gaza. Undoubtedly, however, this is precisely the level we must

target to try to halt the ‘recruitment machine’, and much will therefore depend on the political and awareness-raising work that must begin immediately on this issue, with youth organisations that have been and continue to be part of the anti-war movement taking the lead.

The other key insight we draw from this analysis is the absolutely central role played by the educational institutions of the younger generations in this process of returning to conscription: in all the countries under consideration, schools are the preferred arena of intervention for the warmongers, who know full well that all proposals—more or less subtle—for a return to conscription must be prepared through widespread engagement with young people, and schools are the main place to reach them, so as to make the acceptance of the process of militarisation of the whole of society as natural as possible and gradually lead it to accept, even from an ideological point of view, the necessity of a return to compulsory conscription. Moreover, schools have been a breeding ground for recruitment and ideological penetration for years, and indeed, intervention in educational settings is, as we have seen, a central step on the path leading to ‘total defence’ and the return of conscription. This is why the work of the Observatory against the Militarisation of Schools and Universities proves invaluable: the Observatory is in fact situated in the very place the adversary has chosen as its

preferred site for intervention,²⁶ and it is precisely here, starting with schools, that a pedagogical, cultural and political resistance can be organised—one that sees in the alliance between teachers, students and parents as a tool capable of reversing the trend, a critical mass that radically rejects the infiltration of military values into our classrooms and protects young people from the siren call of ‘careers in uniform’. The more we are able to counter the militarisation

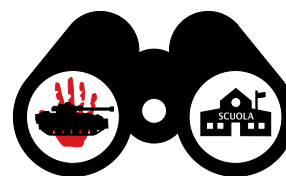
²⁶ The Ministry’s arbitrary cancellation of the conference on 4 November – which the Observatory had organised in collaboration with the training body CESTES – demonstrates just how much attention is being paid to the fight against the militarisation of schools; this was an unprecedented, fascist act aimed at preventing the more than 1,000 teachers who had registered from freely participating in a fully legitimate training event. This reaction from the other side shows us that the path identified by the Observatory is the right one to continue pursuing

of schools, the more we will be able to push both the return of mass conscription and war out of our future.

Neoliberalism, in an attempt to re-engage the masses of the subaltern and push them once again to fight a war for the interests of the ruling classes, would have to negate itself and proceed with a massive redistribution of wealth; instead, it can only continue to create precariousness and low-paid work and attempt to buy off our young people by presenting a military career as a secure and well-paid job. At the same time, they will relentlessly attempt to work deep into society through propaganda, but the fanfare of neoliberalism has no material basis on which to ground its narrative; therefore, pacifists and anti-militarists must capitalise on this structural weakness and graft a radical transformation of social relations onto dissent against war.

Serena Tusini

Observatory against the militarisation of schools and universities



**OSSERVATORIO CONTRO LA
MILITARIZZAZIONE DELLE SCUOLE
E DELLE UNIVERSITÀ**