



Voluntary enlistment and selection: why the real value is not to enlist everyone, but to choose better

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In recent months, the debate on conscription has returned to occupy space in the European public discourse and, particularly, in the Italian one, often, however, in a simplified and misleading form, reduced to a sterile opposition between those who would like to reintroduce it as a universal solution to every security problem and those who reject it as a relic of the past, **incompatible with a modern society**. In the middle, as often happens, the most interesting part of the discussion is lost: not whether conscription makes sense or not, but **what it should really serve** if it were decided to bring it back to life.

A radically different context from the past

The context in which this theme reemerges is radically different from that of the past. War has returned to European soil, crises are no longer episodic but structural, and security can no longer be delegated exclusively to a limited number of highly specialized professionals. In this

scenario, the idea of voluntary conscription is proposed not so much as a tool for external military projection, but as a **mechanism for strengthening the internal resilience of the State**.

It is in this vein that the statements of **Defense Minister Guido Crosetto** are also placed, who has repeatedly clarified how, in the current vision, any personnel trained through a new conscription would not be destined for missions abroad or conventional war scenarios, but employed mainly in areas of internal security, support to institutions, protection of critical infrastructures, and emergency management.

In other words, conscription maintains a **precise and declared purpose**: to enable an additional number of citizens to use weapons, understand the military context, and manage crisis situations, contributing to building a minimal base of widespread skills that today, simply, no longer exists.

At the same time, however, limiting itself to this function would be a missed opportunity. Precisely because conscription represents a significant investment in economic, organizational, and human terms, it can and must also fulfill a second strategic function: **become a structured system of observation, evaluation, and selection of human potential**. Not as an alternative to its primary purpose, but as its natural evolution.

A phase of mutual observation State-Citizen

A well-designed voluntary conscription should not be thought of as retaining everyone, nor as automatically transforming into a mass recruitment channel. It should instead constitute an initial phase in which the State observes the citizen, and the citizen observes the State. A sufficiently long and structured period to bring out behaviors under stress, adaptability, respect for rules, individual initiative, teamwork aptitude, and fatigue management. **All elements that no aptitude test or motivational interview can really measure.**

In this phase, the goal is not to create soldiers ready for combat, but **to collect real human data**, observing people in a constrained context, with responsibility and pressure, where self-narratives collapse and behaviors remain. It is here that substantial, often unexpected differences emerge: those who discover they are not suited, and those who, perhaps for the first time, discover they are.

A system set up in this way would allow the Armed Forces to **select much more efficiently** compared to current recruitment channels, which tend to intercept only those who are already motivated or who see a military career as the only available option. Expanding the initial pool, and then selecting with rigorous criteria, means increasing the average quality of personnel, reducing early dropouts, and limiting investment in profiles that, over time, prove unsuitable.

The issue of highly specialized units

This reasoning becomes even more relevant if we observe what is happening in the recruitment of the most highly specialized units. In recent years, due to the difficulty in finding suitable personnel within the Armed Forces, there has been an increasing attempt to draw directly from the civilian world to feed the selection pools of the Special Forces, relying on the fact that motivation and determination could compensate for the lack of previous experience.

The result, in practice, is often having to compress **selection processes** into extremely short times that, by their nature, would require a long observation phase. Selecting individuals in a few weeks who have never experienced even the most basic forms of outdoor life, environmental adaptation, prolonged fatigue, or stress management means shifting the risk much further in the process, when the training investment is already high and the cost of error becomes critical.

In this sense, a structured conscription can represent **a fundamental intermediate step**. Not because everyone should aspire to the Special Forces, nor because conscription should become their automatic antechamber, but because it allows for a natural and progressive screening of those who possess, at least potentially, those minimum characteristics of resilience, discipline, and adaptability that constitute the prerequisite for any high-intensity operational path.

Conscription does not simplify the selection of the Special Forces; it makes it more honest, bringing part of the evaluation **before**, when the human, economic, and organizational cost is still sustainable.

Not Just Armed Forces: Mapping Skills Useful to the State

There is also another aspect, often overlooked: **not all selected personnel must necessarily join the Armed Forces**. Some can be directed towards operational reserves, civil protection, support for critical infrastructure, logistics, cyber defense, or other areas of national security. In

this way, conscription also becomes a tool for mapping skills useful to the State, not a funnel that forces everyone towards the same destiny.

This approach also reduces a significant political and social risk: that of turning conscription into a collective punishment, perceived as time taken away from personal life without a real return. A conscription structured in this way clarifies from the outset that the service is not “stolen” time, but **time invested**, because it allows participants to acquire concrete skills, to truly understand the military and operational context, and to evaluate more consciously whether that is the life they intend to pursue.

For those who have never had direct contact with the military environment, conscription would become a first real, non-idealized approach, far from both heroic rhetoric and abstract fears. For those who already intend to participate in recruitment competitions, it would represent a **valuable opportunity** to measure themselves against the daily life, rules, constraints, and responsibilities that choice entails, drastically reducing the risk of decisions based on erroneous expectations or superficial knowledge of the military world.

A Clear Exchange: Commitment in Exchange for Training

In this sense, conscription is no longer an imposed duty that gives nothing back, but **a clear exchange**: the State asks for commitment, time, and discipline, and in return offers training, experience, guidance, and an honest assessment of one's aptitudes. It is a model that lowers cultural resistance, increases social acceptance, and makes the choice of enlistment more mature and conscious, especially among the new generations, who tend to reject systems perceived as coercive, opaque, or lacking a concrete return.

Of course, all this requires serious planning. Six improvised months are not enough, nor are confused programs that mix training, civic education, and social work without a clear hierarchy of objectives. A structure is needed from the outset to **enable, observe, evaluate, and direct**, with instructors trained not only in technical training but also in reading human behavior in operational contexts and under pressure.

If the debate on conscription continues to be addressed only as an ideological issue, as an electoral campaign theme, or worse, as a simple tool to inflate numbers to meet formal parameters or international alliance requests, the risk is to build a system that exists on paper

but does not produce real capability. Chasing the illusion of numbers, without ensuring quality, sustainability, and coherence, means shifting the problem over time, not solving it.

After Conscription: Strategic Reserve and Periodic “Refreshment”

An additional key element concerns the fate of those who, at the end of the initial path, do not continue in the Armed Forces, either because they do not pass the selection or because they consciously decide not to continue. This personnel does not represent a failure of the system, but **a natural resource**. They can form a **strategic reserve**, callable in case of need, and maintain a minimum level of training over time through periodic updates and “refreshment”, similar to what happens in countries like Switzerland.

Moreover, the system could allow these individuals to reapply for competitions or selection paths in subsequent years, up to the maximum age, offering more opportunities and reducing the “all or nothing” effect that characterizes many recruitment processes today. In this way, conscription would become a **flexible mechanism**, capable of adapting to people's times and the State's needs, **optimizing effort, costs, commitment, and time**, without dispersing the trained human capital.

The “Pipeline” to Law Enforcement

There is also an aspect often ignored in public debate, but well known to those who work in the sector. Today, a significant part of those who enlist in the Armed Forces do so also with the aim of gaining requirements, experience, and titles useful for accessing competitions of the **Police Forces or the Guardia di Finanza**, benefiting from dedicated channels, reserved positions, or procedures provided by the regulations. It is not necessarily a sign of “opportunism”, but rather the natural effect of a system that, in fact, makes these transitions possible and often convenient.

In this context, a well-designed voluntary conscription could help make the system more readable and coherent.

Those who complete the initial path and decide to proceed towards Law Enforcement would not do so “reflexively” or as a side effect, but within an explicit and regulated trajectory: the State trains, evaluates, and guides; the citizen truly understands what the choice entails. The

transition to Police and Guardia di Finanza would thus become a recognized continuity, based on **discipline, training, understanding of the operational context** and aptitude assessment already tested in the field.

It is not a new concept. In the past, there was already the idea of the “**conscripted carabinieri**,” understood not as a temporary or fallback figure, but as a trained citizen, integrated into a clear and functional path for both defense and internal security.

Reviving that logic, updating it to the current context, would mean overcoming the current fragmentation between **Armed Forces and Law Enforcement**, creating a training and selection chain where the steps are more linear and understandable.

A virtuous chain: train, observe, direct

In this model, conscription would no longer be a waiting period to endure, but the first link in a virtuous chain that allows the State to **train, observe, and direct** personnel towards the most suitable role, whether in the Armed Forces, Law Enforcement, or the strategic reserve, reducing ambiguity and unrealistic expectations.

Today, conscription should not serve to demonstrate strength, but to **build capabilities**.

And capability does not arise from numbers, but from the right people, chosen in the right way, at the right time.