

THE DEBATE ON UNIVERSAL NATIONAL SERVICE: BETWEEN POLITICAL WILL AND PUBLIC CONFUSION

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ABSTRACT

For the first time since compulsory national service was suspended in 2001, decided in 1997, the French people have elected a president who proposes re-establishing a form of universal and compulsory service. The announcement by Emmanuel Macron caused a major stir during the election campaign. However, it was only the latest contribution to a long debate on how to mobilise young people for the good of society. It also corresponded to an increasingly apparent political concern for national cohesion and unity. It became explicit during the 2007 election campaign, marked by the memory of the recent 2005 urban riots, and now made omnipresent by the 2015 terrorist attacks. The debate was intended to implement this new national service. However, since the presidential campaign, it has instead revealed public confusion about the pre-2001 national service, as well as the difficulty of identifying the role that the armed forces – now fully professionalised – could play. This paper aims to explore this debate and resituate it in the context of the recurring discussions in French politics since 1997, as well as in the long-term perspective of France's collective mindset. It will also examine how this idea is taking form at the European level.

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Since the suspension of national service in 2001,¹ following the adoption of the law of 28 October 1997,² the subject has never entirely left the political and media spotlight. However, for the first time, in 2017, a candidate promising to reinstate a form of compulsory national service was elected President of the Republic. Since then, the implementation of this programme has given rise to several debates in parliament, within the government and, far beyond, among all the stakeholders potentially involved in this project. Today in France, there are on average around 800,000 young men and women in each year-group. Depending on the final criteria, between 600,000 and 650,000 of them would be called-up each year. The scale of these numbers, together with collective introspection on the meaning of national unity and the place that conscription holds in national and republican memory, has made these debates highly impassioned. Nevertheless, they are intended to generate concrete proposals.

This paper aims to explore this debate and to resituate it in the context of the recurring discussions in French political since 1997, as well as in the long-term perspective of France's collective imaginary. It will also to examine how this idea is taking form in the contemporary European landscape.

THE BIRTH OF AN ELECTORAL PROMISE

Emmanuel Macron's announcement on 18 March 2017 caused a major stir. A number of reserve generals, at the request of the candidate, had proposed various forms of "citizenship programme," but the formula chosen by Emmanuel Macron did not correspond to their proposals. The words of the future president were as follows:

The strategic situation that I have described and the threats against our country also demand that we reinforce the bond between the armed forces and the Nation by enabling all our young people to gain an experience of military life and to play their full part in the spirit of national defence. For this purpose, I therefore wish that every young French person should have the opportunity, even if only briefly, to experience military life. A short period of compulsory and universal national service shall therefore be established. This is a major social project – a truly "republican" project – which is intended to increase the unity and improve the resilience of our society. It will also help to deepen the relationship between the armed forces and the nation. I have taken this decision in view of the challenge facing us. It is a challenge of security and education, and a challenge that is both economic and social. It is also a moral challenge and a challenge of civilisation. To meet it, we will have to re-forged the bond between the armed forces and the Nation.

This universal national service, managed by the army and the National Gendarmerie, will be open to all able-bodied young women and men across the age group – about 600,000 young people per year. Through direct experience of military life, with its specific skills and demands, each young French woman and man will meet fellow-citizens from different backgrounds and will gain an experience of social diversity and republican unity over a period of one month. Each young citizen must undertake this period of military service

1. Decree No. 2001-550 of 27 June 2001 concerning early release of persons conscripted to military service.
2. Law No. 97-1019 of 28 October 1997 concerning the reform of national service.

within 3 years of their 18th birthday. At the end of this period, these young people will be assisted in accessing professions in the armed forces, as active members of the military or National Guard. This universal military service will also provide a supplementary reserve that can be mobilised in addition to the National Guard in times of crisis.

Universal military service will also help to detect difficulties, such as illiteracy, and will provide a remedial education programme for those who need it. It will therefore help to prepare young people to enter professional life and for their life as citizens.

Ladies and Gentlemen, since this project concerns our entire society and demonstrates my strong faith in our Defence and our armed forces, its implementation and detailed structures will demand a major debate, involving parliament, civil society and the relevant ministries. The indispensable consultations that I am initiating here will be conducted as part of the preparations for the next White Paper on Security and National Defence. They will serve as a basis for drafting a bill, which the Government should present to me by the end of 2017.

This project will obviously involve significant costs, for which I assume responsibility. Building unity between the military institutions of the Republic and the young people of France and strengthening our national cohesion are goals that are worth the price. With infrastructure costs estimated at between 15 and 20 billion euros, we estimate that the programme will cost 2 to 3 billion euros per year once it is fully underway.

Its financing and the personnel required to run the programme will be in addition to the budgeted military spending of 2% of GDP, since the establishment of universal national service is independent of the planned strengthening of our national defence.³

Since the election of Emmanuel Macron, the impassioned debates on how to implement his electoral promise have only intensified. The month of February 2018, in particular, was marked by a succession of political declarations, interpreted by many journalists as the symptoms of a debate mired in confusion. On 4 February, a report commissioned by the government was leaked to *Les Échos*, but never published, which questioned the feasibility of the president's project.⁴ On 9 February, the defence minister, Florence Parly, declared on the France Inter radio station that the future national service would "probably not be compulsory." During the hours and days that followed, several members of the government explained that national service would, in fact, be compulsory, but that it should be perceived as "attractive" and "not punitive." Members of parliament conducted their own study, but its publication was repeatedly postponed. Finally, the report on their fact-finding mission, was presented on 14 February 2018 and recommended an improved "citizenship education programme," in phases throughout school years.⁵ The two rapporteurs, Marianne Dubois and Émilie Guérel, complained that they had been forced to work under unsatisfactory conditions, having been denied access to certain data. On the evening of 13 February, when the conclusions of this parliamentary report had already leaked on France Inter, Emmanuel Macron declared to the presidential press association: "This service is not a military service, even though I wanted to be able to provide a gateway to the military. For that reason, it is 'national' and also 'universal', because I wished it to be compulsory. In practice, it can also

3. "Defence policy," speech by Emmanuel Macron, 18 March 2017, Hôtel des Arts et Métiers, Paris.

4. Marie-Christine Corbier, "Le rapport qui accable le service national universel," *Les Échos*, 4 February 2018.

5. Information report submitted by the Committee of National Defence and the Armed Forces, on completion of its information study on the planned universal national service programme, presented by Marianne Dubois and Émilie Guérel, 14 February 2018.

take the form of civic service [...] The idea is not that it should last a full year. Today, I think that people are thinking more in terms of a quarterly timescale [...] The actual compulsory part has not yet been finalised, but I think that it will last between three and six months.” A few weeks later, on 18 April, at a press conference, it was the turn of spokesmen Jean-Marie Bockel and Jean-Marc Todeschini, speaking on behalf of the senators of the Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and the Armed Forces, to announce the results of their own study and hearings. In a four-page summary, they, like their lower-chamber colleagues, expressed their concerns over the feasibility of the president’s project, and in particular urged that the armed forces should not be burdened with a massive, costly programme that would not even be strictly military. They also emphasised the importance of not disrupting existing schemes (civic service, National Guard, EPIDE, SMV etc.).⁶

In any case, the terms of the future national service have evolved since the election campaign. The current timetable foresees an experimental introduction in 2019. This demonstrates the uncertainties around how to implement the project, despite the initial consensus over its principles.

CONFUSED COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CONTINUOUS PUBLIC DEBATE

The state of the debate is emblematic of collective memory of conscription, military service and national service. Without even going back to the formal institution of contemporary military service under the Third Republic,⁷ the distinctions between these three forms of service and their practicalities are unclear to the public, as shown by how the terms are used interchangeably by many journalists.

After the Algerian War, the type of draft changed repeatedly. The compulsory period of “military service” was progressively reduced, and its names were changed. In 1965, it became “national service” and was diversified to include non-military service. In 1971, the National Service Code (*Code du Service National*) formalised these changes. Over the subsequent decades, young people were increasingly able to avoid compulsory call-up by a variety of exemptions, procedures and tolerated loopholes. By the 1990s, only between 65 and 70% of young men in each age class performed one of the forms of national service, and only one in two young men undertook a period of genuine “military” service. The senators and MPs who debated this subject during the 1990s, in the days before the full professionalisation of the armed forces, called attention to the inequality between those who completed their service and those who managed to avoid it. “The analysis of exempted persons per socio-professional category seems to show that the rate of exemption in the privileged categories (management executives and independent professionals), at 30.1%, is well above

6. “Où en est le service national universel ?” Summary press release, presented by Jean-Marie Bockel and Jean-Marc Todeschini on behalf of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and the Armed Forces, French Senate, 18 April 2018. http://www.senat.fr/fileadmin/Fichiers/Images/commission/affaires_etrangeres/ Docs en pdf/4 pages SNU.pdf.

7. Annie Crépin, *Histoire de la conscription*, Gallimard, Folio Histoire, 2009; Michel Auvray, *L’âge des casernes, histoire et mythes du service militaire*, éditions de l’Aube, 1998.

the average, which would tend to confirm the link between social privilege and avoidance of the obligations of national service. Also, the rate of exemption for the category of young people with the highest qualifications (postgraduate level, Master of Advanced Studies), standing at 21.4% in 1995, is also above the average.”⁸ The forms of service performed also varied widely according to socio-professional category: Senator Vinçon concluded that “the elites escape the strictest and most demanding forms of national service. In the Army, the proportion of conscripts with a national secondary school diploma (‘baccalauréat’) is 55%. This proportion rises to 80% for conscientious objectors. Similarly, in the national service postings of young people for 1992, 80% of young men classified as ‘low level’, with significant social and educational disadvantages, were assigned to the Army.”

Today, these figures are cited by historians, sociologists and legislators working on the ongoing projects, but the debate is heavily influenced by public perceptions and recollections of national service, and in particular its military component. In fact, compulsory military service, unified and universal to all French youths, with many imperfections, only existed from 1905 to 1965. However, the image of the citizen-soldier is bound up in revolutionary history and the founding of the Third Republic, in opposition to Prussia, and then Germany. It therefore continues to colour the national imagination in its successive partial and imperfect variations. During the period from 1905 to immediately after the Second World War, this image of the citizen-soldier was constructed in film and literature, focusing on the act of combat in the service of the nation (whether idolised or, on the contrary, attacked in the name of pacifism). This “collective imaginary” is closely tied to the perceptions of the French soldier (whether volunteers or conscripts) during the two world wars. Starting immediately after 1918, this consisted not only of heroic figures but also martyrs and victims.⁹ In the cinema, the French soldier of the Second World War is almost non-existent¹⁰ or is the main character in comedy films (the trilogy of “The Seventh Company” – *La Septième Compagnie* is a typical example).

With the end of the Algerian War, the portrayal of conscripts became very clearly dissociated from those of volunteers. In the cinema, the conscript was no longer a citizen-soldier but a victim (15,000 conscripts lost their lives during the conflict). They were also a political symbol, following the social movements against “the patriarchy” of the 1960s and 1970s and the ensuing anti-militarism. These attacks become less virulent in the 1980s and 1990s, but the unflattering image of the “squaddie” or “grunt” still characterised media representations until the turn of the millennium. During the period when national service was suspended, between 1997 and 2001, the imagery used by television, in particular, retained these negative tropes. It focused on chores and dull, menial tasks.

8. *L'avenir du service national*, Report by senator Serge Vinçon of the Commission for Foreign Affairs, Defence and the Armed Forces, report No. 349, 1995-1996, quoting Jean Bastide, in *Les formes civiles du service national*, report presented on behalf of the Economic and Social Council, 1995.

9. Nicolas Beaupré, “La victimisation des combattants de la Grande Guerre,” in *Guerre et paix. Une destinée européenne ?*, Sylvain Schirmann ed., Brussels, Peter Lang, 2016, 99-112.

10. French films mainly tell stories of the civilian heroes of the French Resistance (in *La Bataille du Rail* – “The Battle of the Rails,” directed by René Clément and released in 1946, or *L'Armée des Ombres* – “Army of Shadows,” directed by Jean-Pierre Melville and released in 1969).

From the mid-2000s, there was a rapid change in in the standard media treatment, in two respects. First, the treatment of national service gradually became more positive, focusing on images of physical exercise or learning useful skills (such as passing a driving test or handling weapons).¹¹ Second, the social role of the armed forces started to be regularly covered, following the launch of several socio-educational initiatives and professional integration projects organised and coordinated by the military. While in the early 2000s the media coverage of the military's social role was disconnected from specific combat duties and had been restricted to the "adapted military service" scheme (*Service Militaire Adapté* – SMA)¹² in France's overseas territories, this idea now began to diversify and spread. In 2005 and 2006, the initiative of General Emmanuel de Richoufftz to offer driving lessons and a driving license to 105 young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods ("105 permis pour 2005") was covered in a news broadcast on TV channel M6 and two news programmes on TF1. Again in 2005, the "Défense 2^e Chance" programme was created to offer young French volunteers training to enter civilian working life.¹³ The scheme became known as EPIDE in 2007. The Defence Ministry withdrew its support from the programme in 2015, and EPIDE has now become the "Public Establishment for Integration in Working Life" (*Établissement Public d'Insertion Dans l'Emploi*). It has received favourable coverage, praising its structure, which relies partly on former members of the armed forces. Overall, these various social initiatives have received positive media attention and have contributed to building a public image of French servicemen and women as performing a valuable socio-educational coaching role, entirely separate from combat.

At the same time, the idea of voluntary or mandatory civic service began to gain ground with each electoral season, especially during presidential elections. In 2002, the question did not yet significantly feature in public debate. The last conscripts had only just removed their uniforms. For budgetary reasons, in particular, the schemes to replace national service were reduced to a very modest scale. The "JAPD" (*Journée d'Appel de Préparation à la Défense*, a one-day call-up for briefing on defence and careers in the military) had been in place since 1998 (it eventually became the Defence and Citizenship Day – *Journée Défense Et Citoyenneté* – in 2011). It is unconvincing but has persisted as a default, apparently consensual solution. François Bayrou, as presidential candidate in 2002, proposed a civil and civic service, to be performed "periodically, *à la carte*, between the ages of 18 and 25." Fellow candidates Jean-Marie Le Pen and Jean-Pierre Chevènement proposed a military version of national service. While Le Pen suggested a voluntary six-month scheme designed to boost the ranks of the reserve national guard, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, who was very attached to conscription and the idea of the citizen-soldier, announced the establishment of a short, ten to twelve-week national service to form a national guard. Although these proposals were promoted

11. Bénédicte Chéron, *L'image des militaires français à la télévision, 2001-2011*, Étude de l'IRSEM 21, 2012.

12. On 14 July 2001, for example, just before the live coverage of the military parade, a France 2 TV report was devoted to the SMA. The programme was launched in 1961 in the French West Indies and French Guiana and then gradually spread to all of France's overseas departments and regions. In the first month of the scheme, the young volunteers undergo basic military training (including weapons handling) before receiving a military professional training course. In 2016, the SMA boasted a professional integration success rate of 77%. It currently accepts about 6000 young men and women per year.

13. For further information on all these social integration programmes, see the report by Barbara Jankowski, researcher at IRSEM (Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire – The Institute for Strategic Research), *Le rôle des armées dans la fonction "intégration" de l'État*, Étude de l'IRSEM 63, 2018.

by the candidates in the media, they did not have any major influence on the political debate. Neither Jacques Chirac nor Lionel Jospin envisaged reopening the debate on any form of national service.

CIVIC SERVICE ENTERS THE SCENE

During the 2007 presidential elections, the political debate was particularly affected by the memory of the 2005 urban riots, which followed the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré in Clichy-sous-Bois. Anxiety over the foundations of national unity came to be openly expressed. Both Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal included the idea of civic service in their election programmes. Sarkozy proposed a six-month civic service which could be made compulsory after a trial period, while Royal's proposal would be entirely voluntary. François Bayrou, the third candidate in the election, argued for compulsory civic service, remaining faithful to his promises of 2002. The political context at the time was favourable to this proposal. In 2006, Admiral Alain Béreau, a member of the Prime Minister's Advisory Board on Analysis of Society, chaired by Luc Ferry, delivered an initial report entitled *Should a civic service be made compulsory? (Faut-il rendre un service civil obligatoire ?)*. After his election, Nicolas Sarkozy entrusted Luc Ferry with a further study on the subject, resulting in a new report by the philosopher and admiral, advocating a civic service programme: *Pour un service civique* (Odile Jacob, 2008). In March 2010, the voluntary civic service programme was established.¹⁴ Additionally, the 2007 "Equality of Opportunities" plan not only involved the ministries of National Education, Employment and Urban Affairs, but also the Ministry of Defence.¹⁵ As part of this programme, the armed forces participated in eight initiatives – defence cadets; defence and global security classes; a tutorship scheme whereby schoolchildren in difficulty were tutored by pupils of the elite military schools; defence secondary schools (lycées); vocational training courses; and the local reservists for youth and citizenship.

In the 2012 presidential elections, no candidate questioned the merits of the civic service system, at least for most of its programmes, which was now considered an asset to be capitalised upon. Both François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy proposed strengthening it. Hollande promised that every French young person aged 16 to 18 who had dropped out of school would be provided with a vocational training course either as part of an apprenticeship or via the civic service system. Sarkozy promised to double the scheme's workforce.

On the eve of the 2015 terrorist attacks, French public debate on the possible forms of service was characterised by three main features:

- Civic service was praised by almost all politicians. However, the idea of making it compulsory remained marginal.

14. Law No. 2010-241 of 10 March 2010 concerning civic service.

15. See the report by Barbara Jankowski, *Le rôle des armées dans la fonction "intégration" de l'État*, op. cit.

- Media coverage of the armed forces' socio-educational and professional integration initiatives was extremely positive and contributed a large part to the excellent image of the French military.

- Political parties both sought and encouraged the involvement of the armed forces in inter-ministerial initiatives to support young people. They saw consulting with military personnel on questions of citizenship and national unity as key.

The programmes entrusted to the armed forces and to civic service were kept clearly distinct. Civic service had no military connotation (with the exception of a small number of contracts that were clearly budgeted as part of the armed forces). However, all these programmes were aimed at young people and corresponded to a political concern that had remained constant since 2005: to strengthen the sense of engagement and national cohesion, as well as to allow young people who seemed to be on the margins of society to (re) learn the rules of collective life.

Since the suspension of national service in 1997, there was widely felt to be a missing link in social integration, the mixing of different social classes and civic socialisation. This sense went far beyond the single question of national service, but the suspension of national service in 1997 provided a convenient focal-point for the public debate. As a consequence, the public debate surrounding the implementation of these programmes was all the more vigorous.

THE ARMED FORCES ENJOY A POSITIVE PUBLIC IMAGE

After the 2015 terrorist attacks, the use to the armed forces was given visibility and legitimacy by the deployment of Operation Sentinelle on French soil. Additionally, François Hollande decided to establish a version of SMA for metropolitan France, in the form of Voluntary Military Service ("SMV"). The trainees would not handle weapons and the vocational training would be overseen by civilian personnel. This initiative received considerable media coverage: 74% of young people aged 15-17 said that they knew about SMV, or at least had heard of it.¹⁶ This media coverage reinforced the image of the armed forces as an institution of integration and social rehabilitation for the young people of France. Every time a new SMV centre was opened, the headlines gushed with enthusiasm: "In La Rochelle, voluntary military service is for jobs, not war,"¹⁷ "Regaining a taste for work with the army";¹⁸ "Voluntary military service: giving young people a second chance";¹⁹ "We are training workers, not fighters".²⁰ In 2017, the Schoendoerffer Prize (which was established in 2012 by the French Army to reward audio-visual productions concerning military life) was awarded to a full-length documentary film by Charlotte Marie entitled "Volunteers for

16. Survey by the CSA (French Audio-visual Board) for DICOD (Defence Communications Watchdog) *Les jeunes et la Défense*, March 2017.

17. Fabien Magnenou, "À La Rochelle, le service militaire volontaire prône l'emploi, pas la guerre," *francetvinfo.fr*, 14 January 2016.

18. "Retrouver le goût du travail à l'armée," TV report for the "19-20" news on France 3, 3 February 2016.

19. "Service militaire volontaire : une seconde chance pour des jeunes en difficulté," *lci.fr*, 22 February 2016.

20. Aurelia Salinas, "Nous ne formons pas des combattants, mais des travailleurs," *lasemaine.fr*, 5 juin 2016.

the new military service: the year that will change their lives" (*Volontaires du nouveau service militaire: l'année qui va changer leur vie*), which was broadcast by M6 in their "Zone Interdite" programme on 5 February 2017. At present, the Voluntary Military Service accepts about 1000 young male and female volunteers per year.

At the same time, media coverage of the pre-1997 national service has resumed focus on its positive military aspects. The "Garde-à-vous" TV programme, broadcast on M6 in February and March 2016, is a key example. This docu-reality TV series allowed young men to experience the military service of the 1970s and, more particularly, its classroom. The producers wanted to highlight an "experience" that could generate intergenerational debate. In their publicity, the production team repeatedly and insistently emphasised that the "contingent" was under the supervision of former military personnel. All the old collective memories (cleaning fatigues, hospital beds, combat course etc.) were brought back to life. For added realism, the "conscripts" were even equipped with fake weapons. The media coverage, except for one article in *Libération*,²¹ was generally favourable, or even enthusiastic. During the debates on national service in 1996 and 1997, the French slang words *bidasse* and *troufion* (equivalent to squaddie or grunt) were used pejoratively to refer to non-ranking soldiers and conscripts by the opponents of compulsory military service (either because they were anti-militarist or because they supported the professionalisation of the armed forces).²² In contrast, these terms were now used with nostalgia and endearment, in articles promoting the educational value of military virtues. The audience reaction was also positive, despite a slightly waning popularity over successive episodes. The first episode on 16 February 2016 was watched by 3.8 million viewers, including 29% of young people under 25 years old. On social media, "Garde-à-vous" was a regular subject of conversation between 20-year olds of both sexes.

This favourable context also explains the trends in opinion polls on national service since 2015. In January 2015, according to an IFOP survey, 80% of French people wanted a new compulsory national service to be established.²³ The greatest support for this idea came from the older age groups (90% of people aged 65 and over), but it was also supported by a majority of the citizens it would involve, the 18-24 age group (67%). One year later, the figure had dropped to 70.5% (IFOP/*Le Parisien*), but it remained high compared to previous years, when the result had hovered around 60%. In February 2018, another poll (YouGov for HuffPost and CNews) yielded results similar to the pre-2015 figures: 60% of those surveyed said that they favoured the establishment of compulsory national service for a period of three to six months. This lower figure compared to 2015 can be explained by the greater time elapsed since the 2015 terrorist attacks. It can also be interpreted as a sign of the usual trend in French opinion, seen whenever the question of compulsory national service is no longer a remote and theoretical subject, but a concrete proposal advocated by the President and the government.

21. Jérôme Lefilliâtre, "M6, la télé du 'c'était mieux avant'" (M6 the channel of "Things Were Better Before"), *liberation.fr*, 16 February 2016.

22. Bernard Paquetteau, "Mots et stratégies : le débat sur la réforme des armées," *Mots* 51, June 1997, 85-100.

23. IFOP opinion poll conducted on 21 and 23 January 2015 with 1051 respondents.

According to these surveys, the reasons cited by French people for their responses are, as always, more interesting to analyse than the simple answers to the initial question. For example, the 2016 IFOP survey reported that 85.5% of respondents thought that the values advocated during national service would be beneficial to young people. In 2015, the same polling institute explained its results by “the need to have powerful tools of social integration that would ensure the transmission of Republican values and reinforce national unity, as well as creating a mix between the different social classes.” In 2018, the YouGov survey showed that 52% of French people thought that national service should primarily be civic, while 33% believed that it should be mainly military. Opinions concerning the content of national service differed considerably: 75% thought that national service should include civic and citizenship education, 64% that it should provide first aid training, 62% that it could strengthen community life and 39% the experience of social diversity, 36% that it would provide young people with an opportunity to surpass themselves, and, finally, only 12% believed that it should provide training in weapons handling.

These surveys and the current state of public opinion therefore show a general desire that every young person should benefit from a period of collective life and service to the community, for the sake of national cohesion. A military framework and “values,” which are often not clearly defined, have a very positive image, but only a minority of French people express a genuine desire to restore military service in the true sense of the term. The announcements by Emmanuel Macron have therefore remained fairly true to these trends and correspond to an aspiration that seems to have taken root in contemporary French society. However, the difficulty of determining the actual contents of national service reflects the public’s confusion over the social and educational role that can be delegated to the armed forces.

THE NEED TO CLARIFY THE EXPECTED ROLE OF THE ARMED FORCES

As candidate, Emmanuel Macron clearly announced that he wanted to “re-forge the bond between the armed forces and the nation.” Yet the place of the professional armed forces in the nation also requires clarification in the debate. For the armed forces, this question is vital. Even though there are considerable financial resources available to the government for this project, there are still questions over the goals of this scheme, which heavily involves the armed forces but does not aim to provide military training on behalf of the nation. This had been a marginal question since 2005, but has now become central.

In fact, Macron’s proposal during the campaign followed pronouncements by other figures. During the primary campaigns organised by “Les Républicains”, Nicolas Sarkozy had announced his intention to extend the “Adapted Military Service” (SMA) scheme, which already existed overseas, to mainland France. The armed forces would provide a similar period of training to French 18-year olds who had no school diploma, no vocational training or no job. Presidential candidate Sarkozy wanted to see those 100,000 young people who annually drop-out of school taken under the wing of the military. They would not learn to

bear arms and defend the nation but catch up on their education and to receive training to join the job market. On the left, Arnaud Montebourg, also a primaries candidate, proposed a compulsory national service system with the choice of civilian or military service.

These two primary candidates on the right and left were not alone: many political leaders, most of whom did not eventually stand in the primaries, envisaged various forms of compulsory national service, although not always military. For example, Manuel Valls wished to make the existing voluntary civic service compulsory. On the whole, there was no question of forcing French youth to bear arms, even when asking the military, although many of these proposals remained vague. Those who called for military framework were primarily referring to the social role of the armed forces, unrelated to their combat role.

Of the candidates who eventually qualified to stand in the presidential election, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen both proposed a compulsory period of national service, during which at least some French young people would learn to serve the nation by bearing arms.²⁴ On the left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon called for the creation of a compulsory national citizen's service that could be carried out either in the military or in a civilian institution (police, civil protection, fire and rescue service, national forestry agency, environmental protection bodies and other associations deemed as in the national interest). The military dimension of this proposal was particularly directed towards domestic security (the draftees would not take part in external operations). On the right, Marine Le Pen proposed that the "adapted military service" system (SMA) should be extended to mainland France and spoke of "the progressive reinstatement of compulsory military service for a minimum period of three months," without any further precision.

In fact, the extent to which many of the 2017 campaign proposals dissociated between the armed forces' social and combat roles reflects an ignorance of the specific value of the military.²⁵ Solidarity, honesty, loyalty, discipline are virtuous in themselves, but are also vitally important to the armed forces. This is not because successive Chiefs of Staff decided to make institution a sort of finishing-school for these values, but because they guarantee effectiveness in combat, which is ultimately the purpose and the heart of the military profession. To envisage "re-forging the bond between the armed forces and the nation", through a programme that would systematically and permanently assign the armed forces in a role outside their primary core vocation, largely explains the reservations expressed by parts of the military community.

Compared to most other European countries, the idea of heavily involving the military in a programme with non-military goals seems to be specific to France. In seven European countries (Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Norway and Switzerland), the armed forces do assume responsibility for young people. However, this is only through schemes

24. With less electoral weight, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan also called for the reinstatement of compulsory military service.

25. The idea that the military has a specific value stems from the work of sociologists who have sought to define the foundations and limitations of the unique quality of military enlistment. In particular, Bernard Boëne has stimulated analysis of this question ("Permanence et relativité de la spécificité militaire," in *La Spécificité militaire*, B. Boëne ed., Armand Colin, 1990). This specific value of the military profession continues to be studied and analysed. It will always be relevant to understanding military questions, as has been shown by Laure Bardiès in her article "Du concept de la spécificité militaire", *L'Année sociologique* 61, 2011/2, 273-295.

that variably aim to ensure that all or some of each generation of school leavers learn to bear arms for the nation. Other countries have various forms of reserves and national guard, which are more developed than the schemes available in France. Nevertheless, the conditions of these programmes are still subordinated to a coherent goal, namely the availability of additional armed forces to reinforce the professional ranks.

There are also schemes that involve military professionals working with young people between the end of school and the beginning of adult life. In October 2016 in the United Kingdom, Michael Fallon, then Defence Minister, announced his plan to increase the number of “cadet units” from 300 to 450 (especially in state schools, which until then had been in the minority). His goal was to convey to the young Britons the values of unity and effort, especially in response to the fears of islamist influence in some neighbourhoods. Cadets are given genuine military experience, including weapons handling (with blank ammunition). This type of programme is not aimed at all members of the age group. With key differences (a less developed strictly military experience), “defence classes” and “cadets” have existed in France since the implementation of the “Equality of Opportunity” and “Voluntary Military Service” initiatives. They are based on the same principle of assigning the armed forces a supporting role for target groups and volunteers.

Finally, as was the case in France, in many countries that decided to suspend military service (e.g. the UK in 1960 or Germany in 2011), there were public debates to determine the best ways to encourage young people to serve society and the national community. With varying success, these debates culminated in the establishment of civic and citizenship service programmes, usually on a voluntary basis. These voluntary schemes are strictly civilian, and the armed forces are not involved, except in cases where, depending on the country, young people can opt to carry out their service in uniform. In these cases, the participant enters a process of genuine military training.

CONCLUSION

The working group on national service, appointed by Emmanuel Macron to study the practical implementation of this project is chaired by General Daniel Ménaouine and comprises six members.²⁶ Its conclusions, initially announced for the end of April, should finally be published in mid-May.

For the armed forces, the challenge goes beyond the budgets, means and military personnel involved. It also, more importantly, includes the meaning of their role within the nation and consequently the meaning of the commitment made by each young man or

26. Kléber Arhou, Prefect and national coordinator for the reception of migrants, Marion Chapulut, president of CitizenCorps, an NGO that aims to promote the engagement of young people and develop their potential, Guy Lavocat, human resources consultant and specialist in the social management of HR, Juliette Méadel, former Secry of State for Aid to Victims, Emmanuelle Pérès, general delegate of the Fédération de la Formation Professionnelle (vocational training federation) and Thierry Tuot, former director general of the Fonds d’Action Sociale pour les Immigrés (Social Action Fund for Immigrants).

woman who decides to enlist in these institutions.²⁷ This point deserves the full attention of political leaders, especially since the question of the morale of the French military was been openly raised by the 11th Report of the High Committee for Evaluation of the Military Condition, published in September 2017. The report revealed that personnel retention will be a crucial challenge for the years to come²⁸ and that 62% of military personnel, including the gendarmerie, planned to leave the armed forces, with very high figures for the Navy (81%), Air Force (72%) and Army (67%). The available data point to the conclusion that besides budgetary challenges, the question of “purpose” remains crucial to military personnel, who know that they are well-loved but do not always feel well-understood. In January 2017, 88% of French people claimed to have a good image of the armed forces (IFOP/DICOD, May 2017), but only 77% of French military personnel thought that this was true. 80% think that their fellow-citizens consider the military to be competent and 74% that they are effective, but fewer of them (67%) believe that the armed forces are a source of pride for the French people. Even fewer still think that the French people appreciate their true value (43%) or even have an accurate knowledge of them (33%).²⁹ The question therefore remains of whether the large-scale use of military personnel for young leadership, without a combat element, which gives the military profession its meaning and ultimate aim, would further accentuate this tension. It risks blurring the image of the armed forces by presenting it as a primarily socio-educational institution.

There is also the question of the future of civic service. This year, the programme is celebrating its eighth anniversary, with an growing number of volunteers enlisting in NGOs or public services for a period of six to twelve months (123,000 in 2017).³⁰ Its supporters emphasise the time and attention necessary for this type of initiative to be useful to society as a whole and to genuinely benefit the young volunteers

Finally, the compulsory nature of the future programme will become increasingly central to public debate, due to the practical implications. The success of the existing initiatives (SMV, SMA and civic service) is often cited, but this success is largely based on the fact that the young French people who sign up for these schemes have made a voluntary and motivated choice. In a compulsory system, the measures designed to make these programmes attractive would still be insufficient to mobilise 100% of draftees. The idea of punishing those who fail to report for service reveals a strong political will. However, history shows how difficult it was after the 1980s to keep national service obligatory and still bring together French youth from different social backgrounds, providing them with a sense that they were useful to society. These various questions demand both political clarification and an understanding of the social challenges involved in the project. In any case, any reintroduction of national service would necessarily have present something new.

(English translation revised by Andreas CAPSTACK)

27. It is in this context that the association of reserve generals, the “Groupe de Liaison G2S” published a report in January 2018 on the subject of universal national service (“Le Service National Universel”).

28. *La fonction militaire dans la société*, HCECM, 11th Report, September 2017.

29. *Ibid.*, 137 and 138.

30. These volunteers receive a monthly allowance of about 470 euros.

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