

## National Service or a Professional Army: the debate

14<sup>th</sup> January 2013

1 In Austria there will be a public vote this weekend about whether to keep the current system of  
2 national service or to replace it with a professional army plus a form of paid community service. The  
3 vote was called when the two parties sharing power failed to agree on a way forward, and from the  
4 start has been very much a party political issue. In the following text I will outline the positions of the  
5 two sides.

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7 Firstly, the status quo. The current system is that all men must take part in the compulsory national  
8 service, which can take the form of the military or community service. Women are not obliged to  
9 undertake any military service. The national service creates a large workforce which supports a  
10 range of military and community organisations, ranging from the existing professional army to the  
11 Red Cross and aid during natural catastrophes. There is also a social dimension to the current  
12 system, in that young men gain experience, discipline, training, and also a degree of social integration.  
13 However, there is a lot of generalised propaganda contained within the debate and few actual  
14 statistics. For example, aid during catastrophes features prominently as major advantage of the  
15 current system although only 3-8% (depending on the year) of the recruits ever participate in any  
16 catastrophe relief efforts because most of this work is carried out by the numerous local fire brigades.

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18 Secondly, the alternative of a professional army plus a paid – but voluntary – community service.  
19 This would be intended to create a more modern standing army that would be better equipped to deal  
20 with threats such as terrorism and cyber-warfare, and more able to participate in international peace-  
21 keeping efforts alongside NATO countries (Austria is not a member of NATO). The current army is  
22 neither very capable in comparison to those of other countries nor very respected, even within Austria.  
23 The most commonly touted figure for the cost of achieving a credible professional army is double the  
24 current expenditure, although the numbers appear to be guesswork as much as anything else. There  
25 are issues of recruitment to both a future professional army and to the voluntary form of community  
26 service which would also have to be addressed and overcome in the future – just as countries from  
27 Germany to Ireland have done. It is more likely that this second alternative would be open to both  
28 sexes on an equal basis, although the debate steers clear of addressing this properly.

29  
30 In conclusion, there are an almost bewildering range of issues to be considered, from future national  
31 security issues, including European integration, through community work and personal development,  
32 to gender equality and of course economic issues. The outcome of the public vote will not be legally  
33 binding, although the government has said it will honour the choice made by the people... at least for  
34 now.



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