

A universal national service for what?

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L'Armée de Terre dans la société

"The strength of the city lies neither in its walls nor in its ships, but in the character of its citizens. Thucydides

In the particularly tense context of the fight against jihadist terrorism, the risk for France is not so much that we will not be able to win outside our borders or to ward off attacks on national territory, but rather that we will witness a break-up of our society due to a lack of social cohesion. This is the major objective of radical Islamism. Society as a whole must be aware of the defence and security issues facing our country, and be a full-fledged player in them. Beyond its armed forces alone, the country must be able to count on moral forces.

First of all, France, the French youth, needs a rendezvous with itself. It is a question of strengthening the civic spirit, of showing that the homeland is not just a word, that it is also about symbols (the flag, the anthem...) and living together. Secondly, the defence and security of the Nation are the business of all, not of a few professionals (police or military).

In order to meet the dual objective of national cohesion and raising awareness of defence and security issues, the creation of a universal national service for one month for all young men and women in our country is envisaged. This is not a question of re-establishing a nostalgic and counter-productive military service: our army and security forces are now made up of professionals, and conscription does not meet our defence needs today. On the other hand, it is important for young French people to have a personal and collective experience of citizenship, through issues of general interest, including national defence. Despite their often very diverse backgrounds, they must be given the opportunity to rediscover that there are more things that bring them together than reasons to oppose them.

A month-long national service will be an opportunity to restore the foundations and landmarks of a structured group life, to share activities that enable people to surpass

themselves, to strengthen the spirit of citizenship and to instil the values of the Republic. The universal national service will also make it possible to detect the difficulties of our young people, whether medical or social, and will help them to prepare for their entry into professional life as well as their life as citizens. Finally, this period will provide a unique opportunity to spread a spirit of defence among our youth, and will create a formidable draft to fuel the national guard or various forms of service.

It will be an opportunity for young French people to :

- share an experience of collective life, from all social backgrounds;
- receive basic civic training within the framework of Defence: discipline and authority; knowledge of the country's strategic priorities, major security issues; physical activities and sports ;
- to discover the professions related to Defence and, where appropriate, to encourage professional vocations;
- to learn life-saving gestures and how to behave in the event of natural disasters, terrorist attacks, etc. ;
- take a series of tests to help in the fight against illiteracy and propose appropriate training or remedial plans, both within and outside the armed forces;
- make a health check-up.

In addition to training and awareness-raising for the individual, the aim is to strengthen society's resilience through in-depth training in first aid and appropriate behaviour in both emergency and crisis situations (attacks, natural disasters, pandemics, etc.). Moreover, in view of the threat already mentioned of actions to prevent radicalisation and to raise awareness of the duty to remember, the information on rights (rights compass) and awareness of duties (voting, taxes, commitment, organ donations, road safety) should also be part of this month of service.

This mandatory time will demonstrate the duty that every citizen has towards his country, which has just devoted significant resources to its training. Emphasis will have to be placed on citizenship and the participants will have to reflect the reality of the life of society: educators, elected officials, associations. It is a matter of restoring to young people from all walks of life a taste for effort, offering them a structured living environment and re-establishing the notion of authority by helping them to prepare for their beginnings in active life.

Of course, it is all the players in our society, and first and foremost the family unit and the National Education system, which have a major role to play in building national cohesion. But faced with the risk of fracture we face, it is necessary to mobilize all those capable of restoring the will to live together. In this respect, the Defence community is particularly well placed to contribute. According to a recent survey by the French Institute of Public Opinion (Ifop)¹ , 30% of French people find that the military best represents the values of the Republic (far ahead of mayors for 18% and teachers for

17 %). Although national service has been suspended, it is nevertheless true that the armed forces have a vocation to federate actions contributing to national defence. Moreover, they already participate in the training of part of the youth, because even if they are professional, this ambition is the core of their profession. Today, more than

15,000 recruits are already trained each year to become soldiers.

Another area of intervention of the armed forces is integration into the labour market: the adapted military service (SMA) in the overseas departments and territories² and, more recently, the voluntary military service (SMV)³ in France are recognised successes. However, if the armies can provide the structure and supervision by also using the newly created National Guard, other actors should also be involved: elected representatives, trade unions, the National Education system, the Emergency Medical Assistance Service (Samu), the fire brigade, civil security....

The universal national service is a national project and as such is not intended to be carried solely by the Ministry of the Armed Forces. Like the other ministries, it must contribute to it, because the training of young people for the defence of the country and the confidence they have in the army naturally pushes it to the forefront. However, the means to implement this project must not distract the armies from their primary mission, which is the defence of France by force of arms.

Forging the character of citizens for the defense of the city is a long-term project that begins in the family unit, continues in school and can be completed during a short, but dense period, when the citizen, equipped with his or her baggage to enter active life, mingles with his or her fellow citizens to strengthen the national cohesion that binds the walls of the City together.

¹ " Les Français et la cohésion nationale " , Ifop for Synopia, **March 2017**.

² **Adapted military service (SMA) is a French military system for socio-professional integration, created in 1961 for young people the furthest away from employment in the French Overseas Territories.**

³ **In France, the voluntary military service (SMV) created on 1 July 2015 offers young people an integration path towards employment.**

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