

The Evolution and Prospects of Reserve Forces and Voluntary Reserve in Some European Countries: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT: The increase in geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe, the intensification of the military conflict in Ukraine and the evolution of new types of hybrid threats have led to a profound reassessment of national defense strategies across several states in the region. In this context, reserve forces, particularly the voluntary reserve, have become an essential strategic tool for complementing active capabilities, ensuring continuity of mobilization and increasing societal resilience. This article proposes a comparative analysis of the evolution and prospects of the voluntary reserve in four strategically relevant countries: Romania, Poland, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The structure of the work includes a historical incursion into the development of the voluntary reservist system in Romania, followed by a critical evaluation of the policies, institutional models and legislative frameworks in the analyzed states. The method used is that of the comparative case study, with emphasis on the qualitative analysis of documentary sources, corroborated with the contextual interpretation of defense strategies. The article highlights both the differences in approach between these systems and the convergences that can underpin an efficient and adaptable voluntary reserve model. The conclusions aim to formulate operational recommendations for Romania to improve the legislative framework, strengthen civic motivation and expand the voluntary reserve in the national security architecture.

KEYWORDS: Voluntary Reserve, Reserve Forces, National Security, Territorial Defense, Defense Policies, Eastern Europe, Romania, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Strategic Resilience

Introduction

In the last two decades, the nature of armed conflicts and threats to national security has undergone major transformations, which require a profound strategic adaptation of the defense structures of European states. Conventional warfare has been complemented by new forms of aggression—hybrid, asymmetrical, cyber—which require not only robust active military capabilities, but also mechanisms for the rapid and effective mobilization of the population capable of defense. In this context, the concept of the reserve force, especially in its form organized as a voluntary reserve, has once again become an essential pillar of modern military architecture.

For the states of Central and Eastern Europe, the proximity to the Russian Federation, participation in alliances such as NATO or the Eastern Partnership and recent historical experiences have led to increased attention on the need for extensive defensive capabilities,

with an additional human component to support the permanent structures of the army. Thus, Poland and Ukraine have invested heavily in their territorial reserves, while Romania and the Republic of Moldova have adopted more moderate models, which are still in the early stages or in the process of revision (European Defence Agency).

The concept of “voluntary reservist” implies the involvement of citizens in the national defense effort by assuming, on a contractual basis and in peacetime, an intermediate military status between civilian and active. This model allows for regular training of personnel, familiarization with military structures, as well as rapid mobilization in case of need, without immediately resorting to general mobilization. In addition, the presence of a robust voluntary reserve contributes to the strategic resilience of the state by strengthening the link between civil society and defence institutions (Ministry of National Defense, Volunteer Reservist Guide).

In Romania, the establishment of the legal framework regarding voluntary reservists took place relatively recently, through Law no. 270/2015, and its application has experienced a slow evolution, marked by administrative and motivational obstacles. On the other hand, other states in the region, in similar security contexts, have developed more dynamic models, with a visible operational impact. Therefore, a comparative analysis of these approaches is not only useful, but necessary to substantiate an efficient voluntary reserve model in Romania, adapted to contemporary requirements.

The present article aims to investigate these aspects through a structured approach: in Chapter I, we will analyze the historical and normative framework of the emergence of the voluntary reserve in Romania; in Chapter II, we will make a comparison between the Polish, Moldovan, Ukrainian and Romanian models; and in Chapter III, we will assess the prospects for the development of the voluntary reserve in Romania, in correlation with the geopolitical and military developments in the region. Finally, the Conclusions will summarize the lessons learned and propose strategic directions for institutional strengthening.

Brief history regarding the emergence and evolution of the Volunteer Reservist Corps in the Romanian Army

The need for a reserve force in Romania has deep roots in the military tradition of the modern Romanian state, being present since the nineteenth century, when the permanent military structures were complemented by contingents that could be mobilized in case of conflict. In the context of the establishment of compulsory military service in the interwar period, the “army reserve” represented the backbone of rapid mobilization in crisis situations, having a decisive role in the world wars. However, this traditional form of reserve was almost exclusively linked to compulsory recruitment and the status of military in term, becoming less functional in the post-Cold War era, with the professionalization of the army (Bădescu, 2015). After Romania's accession to NATO in 2004 and the transition to a model of professional armed forces, the national defense system underwent a profound reform, which included the suspension of compulsory military service in 2007. This measure, although appreciated at the societal level, created a structural gap in terms of the capacity to replenish the force in case of mobilization, all the more so as the international context began to become tense (European Parliament, 2008). In the absence of a trained, mobilizable and voluntary reserve, Romania faced significant vulnerabilities in terms of preparing the population for defense, despite the constitutional obligations provided for in Article 55 of the Constitution regarding the defense of the country as a “sacred duty of Romanian citizens”. The institutional response came relatively late, with the adoption of Law no. 270/2015 on the Status of the voluntary reservist, which represented a turning point in the reconstruction of the reserve capacity of the Romanian Army. This law introduced, for the first time, the modern concept of “voluntary reservist”—a Romanian citizen who

voluntarily and contractually agrees to undergo periodic military training, to be mobilized in times of crisis and to benefit from specific rights. At the same time, an organization system was established based on the requirements of the Defense General Staff, with the involvement of human resources directorates and territorial military units.

However, law enforcement has encountered significant difficulties. Until 2017, when the Technical Norm for the application of Law 270/2015 was issued, the recruitment and selection process stagnated. The first series of volunteer reservists was trained only in 2018, and the initial results were modest—less than 50% of the available places being occupied (Ministry of National Defense, 2020). The main reasons were identified as the low level of remuneration, unclear obligations and the long duration of training periods, corroborated by a lack of public information and promotion campaigns (Vasile, 2020, p. 48).

In the period 2018-2021, the Ministry of National Defense made efforts to optimize the system, culminating in the amendment of Law 270/2015 through GEO no. 25/2021, which introduced significant improvements in terms of financial rights and clarification of the obligations of reservists. Thus, the monthly allowance has increased from 10% to 30% of the salary of the grade and position, the obligation to report periodically without a call has been eliminated, and the duration of the training has been adapted to the professional realities of the volunteers (Emergency Ordinance no. 25/2021).

Despite these adjustments, in 2023-2024, the recruitment process remains below expectations, with only a few hundred new candidates registered annually, compared to the real need estimated by the Defense General Staff at over 8,000 active volunteer reservists in each mobilization cycle (Major General (r) Nicolae Ciucă, 2023). The situation indicates a clear need for strategic review, both in public communication and in adapting the functional structure of this complementary military corps.

In conclusion, the recent history of the voluntary reserve in Romania demonstrates a slow but necessary evolution in a context of increasing regional pressure. The need to strengthen this component becomes evident not only from the perspective of operational efficiency, but also as a mechanism for civic engagement and societal cohesion, essential in the era of total defense.

Comparative Study of Reserve Forces and Volunteer Reservists in Poland, Romania, The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine

In a regional security climate marked by instability and hybrid threats, the reinforcement of reserve forces has become a strategic concern for several Eastern European states. The institutional models adopted by Poland, Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine reflect both the level of integration into international alliances and the capacity of states to mobilize civilian resources in support of national defense. In the following, we will comparatively analyze the evolution, characteristics and performance of the voluntary reserve in these four countries, identifying good practices and deficiencies relevant to the development of Romania's national capacities.

1. Poland – the Territorial Defence Forces (WOT) model

The evolution of the military reserve system in Poland is closely linked to the structural transformations of the armed forces and the changes in the European security environment. Since the restoration of the Polish state in 1918, the model of military organization has been based on conscription, supplemented by a mobilizable reserve made up of former soldiers and trained volunteers, designed to allow for the rapid expansion of the force in crisis situations (Davies, 2005).

During the Polish People's Republic (1945-1989), the reserve system was integrated into the Soviet-style military doctrine, in which the main role was played by compulsory military service, and reserve structures functioned mainly as an instrument of general

mobilization. The voluntary component existed, but was institutionally limited and subordinated to centralized state mechanisms (Zaloga, 1982).

Decisive transformations took place after 1989, with democratization and the strategic orientation towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Poland's accession to NATO in 1999 accelerated the reform of the army, and the suspension of compulsory military service in 2009 created the need to strengthen a reserve based on volunteers. In this context, the National Reserve Forces (Narodowe Siły Rezerwowe) were established, which introduced voluntary contracts for periodic training and mobilization when needed (Ministry of National Defence of Poland, 2010).

A new turning point occurred after 2016, when the regional security environment led to the creation of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces (Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej), a structure built on a predominantly voluntary model, with missions of territorial defence, support for civil authorities and increasing national resilience. This evolution marks the transition from a reserve system derived from conscription to a mixed, flexible one, centered on the voluntary participation of citizens (Béraud-Sudreau & Giegerich, 2018).

Overall, Poland's path reflects the European trend of transforming military reserves into an instrument adapted to the professional army, in which contractual volunteering and territorial structures play an increasingly important role in ensuring mobilization capacity and strategic resilience. After the 2014 Crimean crisis, Poland accelerated defense reforms by establishing the Territorial Defense Forces (Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej – WOT) as the fifth branch of the military. This military corps is mostly made up of volunteer reservists and has the role of local defense, support in crisis situations and increasing the resilience of civilian communities (Ministry of National Defence of Poland, 2022).

In 2023, WOT had over 35,000 active reservists, integrated into regional structures and operationally subordinated to the General Staff. Unlike Romania, Poland has benefited from cross-party political support, consistent budgets and an intense public recruitment campaign, which has managed to attract motivated young people and professionals from various fields (Nowak, 2023).

The WOT model involves:

- a. 16-day initial training, followed by monthly training;
- b. Voluntary contracts for a term of 2-6 years;
- c. Decent allowances and facilities for public employment;
- d. Focus on local defense, knowledge of the terrain and cooperation with civil authorities (NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2021).

This integrated and coherent approach was cited as a successful model by NATO and the EU, and was later adopted in Ukraine and analyzed, including in Romanian strategic documents.

2. Romania – voluntary reserve with limited applicability

After a brief presentation of the history of military volunteering in Romania, we move on to the regulation of the status of the voluntary reservist by Law 270/2015; it is estimated that today the model is partially implemented and not consolidated. Despite the changes brought by OUG 25/2021, the main problems remain recruitment below the planned level, the low level of attractiveness of the allowance, the lack of involvement of local authorities and the absence of an elementary military educational framework in the pre-university system (Ministry of National Defense, 2023).

Unlike Poland, Romania does not have a structure dedicated to the territorial reserve, but integrates volunteer reservists into existing units, without distinct local defense missions. Training is also fragmented and public communication is deficient (Brumaru, 2025). However, there are growing signs of interest at institutional level for the reform of the voluntary reservist system, especially after the intensification of the conflict in Ukraine.

The Ministry of National Defense announced in 2024 the intention to create a special order for reservists, following the Polish model (Military Observatory, 2024).

3. Republic of Moldova – mixed system in transition

After the proclamation of independence in 1991, the Republic of Moldova began the process of creating its own security and defense institutions, including a mobilization system based on reservists. In the early years, the organization of the reserve was strongly influenced by the Soviet legacy, focusing on military records and the capacity to mobilize citizens previously trained in compulsory military service (King, 2000). In the 1990s and early 2000s, the military reserve functioned mainly as a mobilization reserve, without a well-institutionalized voluntary component, its role being defined mainly by legislation on the preparation of citizens for defense and the maintenance of military records. The armed conflict on the Dniester in 1992 highlighted the importance of a functional mobilization system, influencing the subsequent development of the regulatory framework (Socor, 2004). An important step in the evolution was the adoption and updating of the legal framework on the reserve of the armed forces and the military training of citizens, which introduced mechanisms for the periodic training of reservists and voluntary participation in exercises. Over the past two decades, the reform of the defense sector - supported by cooperation with international partners and with NATO within the framework of partnership programs - has aimed at professionalizing the army and consolidating a more flexible reserve (Ministry of Defense of Moldova, 2021).

The Republic of Moldova, a neutral and constitutionally demilitarized state, maintains a hybrid system of complementing the military personnel, based on:

- a. Compulsory military service lasting 12 months;
- b. Annual recruitment of young people into the army and carabinieri;
- c. Reserves formed by “general mobilization”, without a professionalized voluntary component.

Although there are reform projects, supported by Western partners (Romania, USA), Moldova has not yet established a coherent legal framework for a voluntary contractual reserve. In 2022, the first discussions on the creation of the Territorial Guard—a model inspired by WOT—were launched, but the project has not been legislatively finalized to date (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Moldova, 2020). The lack of a professional reserve creates major vulnerabilities in the regional security context, given the proximity to the conflict zone and the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria. However, the desire for reform is growing, especially among civil society and young volunteers (UNDP Moldova).

Based on these data, we can conclude that today, the reserve system of the Republic of Moldova remains predominantly one of mobilization, but includes elements of voluntary participation in training and exercises, reflecting efforts to adapt to Western standards and a volatile regional security environment. Its evolution indicates a gradual transition from a model inherited from the Soviet period to one closer to European practices, in which periodic training and international cooperation become essential factors.

4. Ukraine – expanded reserve and total war

In Ukraine, the reserve system has developed massively since 2014, and with the Russian invasion in 2022, a total general mobilization was instituted, which led to the creation of a system of active and passive reservists, along with territorial volunteers. The Ukrainian model includes reserves made up of veterans, retired military and volunteers, special laws on mobilization and war volunteering, accelerated and decentralized training, based on local units (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2023).

In 2023, more than 200,000 citizens were enrolled in the *Territorial Defense Forces (TDF)*, with support from regional administrations and civil society. Unlike Poland and

Romania, Ukraine has managed to transform the reserves into an essential instrument of national survival, in a logic of total war. The model is characterized by legislative and operational flexibility, by the combined use of active and passive forces, by close cooperation with the diaspora and international NGOs and by permanent presence in conflict zones. The following table presents a comparative summary of the characteristics and number of military reservists in these countries.

Table 1. Comparison of Volunteer Reserve Systems in Selected European Countries

Country	Institutional model	Number of volunteer reservists (2023)	Specifics
Poland	WOT – Dedicated Force	~35,000	Local defense, fixed-term contract, periodic training
Romania	Integration into units	~1,500	Lack of territorial structure, low allowance
Republic of Moldova	No formal voluntary reserve system	-	In transition, without a clear legal framework
Ukraine	Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) and mobilization system	~200,000	Ongoing War, Total Utilization

Prospects for the Development and Use of the Voluntary Reserve at National Level

The current strategic context in Eastern Europe, marked by long-term instability and uncertainty, forces Romania to profoundly rethink its approach to human resources for defense. In this framework, the development of the voluntary reserve is no longer a logistical option, but becomes a critical element of national resilience and integrated military reaction capacity.

1. The need to redefine the role of the voluntary reserve in the national defense doctrine

Romania's strategic documents, such as the 2023-2027 Defense White Paper and the Defense Planning Directive, explicitly refer to the complementarity of the voluntary reserve in the national defense architecture (Ministry of National Defense, 2022). However, in the absence of a firm doctrinal adaptation and a clear institutional reorganization, the volunteer reservists remain perceived as an auxiliary component, without a distinct operational role.

It is necessary for the military doctrine to clearly provide for concrete tactical and territorial functions for the volunteer reserve corps, in particular in the defense of critical infrastructure, support of local authorities in case of crisis, urban and proximity defense, logistics, communications and civil protection activities (Brumaru, Adriana, 2025). This approach would align Romania with the practices in Poland and Ukraine, where volunteer reservists are actively integrated into real territorial defense missions, not just theoretically trained.

2. Necessary legislative and administrative measures

In order to strengthen the voluntary reserve, a series of urgent measures are required, such as:

- a. *Creation of an autonomous command structure for reservists* (e.g., Territorial Reserve Command), with its own budget and personnel;
- b. *Amending Law 270/2015* to make contracts more flexible, introduce modular trainings and simplify the recruitment procedure;

- c. *Granting concrete benefits*, such as tax reductions, recognition of internships in the professional career, bonuses for employers;
- d. *Introduction of defense education in high schools*, including elective courses on national security and military volunteering;
- e. *Promoting a national public campaign*, which would restore the prestige of the status of voluntary reservist.

Without these measures, the current system risks becoming irrelevant, as other European states are moving towards models of total societal defense.

3. Digitalization, simulations and integration with civil defense

Modern technology today allows for a different approach to the training and integration of reservists. Romania could invest in virtual combat simulators, accessible from territorial centers, digital platforms for summoning, communication and feedback, integration with the DSU and IGSU in joint emergency intervention plans (National Joint Training Center “Getica”, 2024). This multidisciplinary integration would transform the voluntary reserve into a real strategic actor in the protection of society, not just in complementing the active forces.

4. Increasing attractiveness through public recognition and patriotic motivation

An element often ignored in technical discussions is personal and patriotic motivation. In Ukraine, but also in Poland, belonging to the territorial forces is a prestigious civic distinction, with an impact on the social image and public engagement. In Romania, the concept is still perceived as a form of “extra, poorly paid and little recognized military work”. It is vital that central and local authorities create symbolic rituals of admission and public recognition, involve military and civic personalities in promotion, and create a visual identity and brand of the volunteer reservist. Only by revaluing this status, Romania will be able to attract young, educated volunteers with a willingness to get involved.

Conclusions

In a profoundly changed European security landscape, characterised by the resurgence of conventional warfare and hybrid threats, **reserve forces**, particularly **the voluntary reserve**, are becoming essential components of strategic resilience and national defence capability. The comparative analysis of four states in the eastern vicinity of Europe—Poland, Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine—reveals different institutional models, at various stages of development, but united by a common need: the active involvement of citizens in collective defense.

The study demonstrated that Poland stands out for a mature and coherent system, integrated into the national defense doctrine and supported by effective public policies. Romania, on the other hand, although it has legislated the status of the voluntary reservist, has not yet managed to transform this initiative into a functional model with real impact. In the Republic of Moldova, the lack of a formal voluntary structure constitutes a vulnerability, while Ukraine offers the most dramatic example of a society that has turned the reserve into a vital tool for survival and defense.

Consolidating the voluntary reserve in Romania requires more than punctual legislative adjustments. It demands:

- a. coherent strategic vision on the role of the reserve in national defense;
- b. deep institutional reform, with dedicated budget allocations and autonomous command structure;
- c. the involvement of local communities, schools, churches and the private sector in the process of recruitment and public recognition;

- d. and, last but not least, a change of mentality, which would redefine civic patriotism in a functional logic adapted to the present time.

The main recommendation of the research is that Romania should follow a mixed model, combining Poland's technical approach with Ukraine's societal mobilization energy, and adapt it to its administrative and cultural specificities. Only in this way can the Romanian voluntary reserve become not only a military component, but also a symbol of citizens' commitment to the defense of the homeland.

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