



MILITARY RESERVE FORCES ON NATO'S EASTERN FLANK: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF THE VISEGRÁD FOUR AND ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the development and structure of military reserve forces in selected NATO member countries on the eastern flank – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. The study draws upon current legal frameworks, governmental regulations, publicly available materials from national recruitment centres, as well as on relevant previously published academic studies to analyse the evolution of reserve systems following the accession of these countries to NATO. The focus lies on the typology of military reserves, entry criteria and other additional benefits. Additionally, the duration and format of basic training, mandatory refresher training, and the availability of specialised courses are also important considerations. The study aims to compare and interpret national approaches to the modernisation and integration of reserve forces within the broader context of NATO's eastern flank defence posture, a topic of significant relevance in today's geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: active manpower, military reserve, security threats

INTRODUCTION

On 12th March 1999, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary acceded to NATO, followed by Romania and Slovakia on 29th March 2004, thereby forming the eastern flank of the Alliance as it exists today. In the years that followed, conscription was gradually abolished – Hungary and Slovakia in 2004, the Czech Republic in 2005, Romania in 2006, and Poland in 2009 – marking a transition toward professional armed forces (Szűcs, 2009; Chronológia vývoja ..., n.d; Vojenská základní služba ..., 2004; Oprean, 2021; Pobór w PRL ..., 2015). This professionalisation, accompanied by large-scale reductions of professional personnel and a decline in reserve training, reflected both the improved European security environment and broader regional adaptation to NATO standards. Yet the paradox soon emerged: leaner militaries enhanced efficiency, but the indispensability of reserve components for resilience, mobilisation, and readiness became increasingly evident.

Since the inauguration of President Donald Trump on 20th January 2025, it has become clear that Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own defence, as the U.S. strategic pivot to the Indo-Pacific and the “America First” policy have diminished reliance on transatlantic guarantees. At the same time, the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine, together with mounting migration pressures from the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East and persistent regional conflicts such as the Israeli–Palestinian dispute, has further underlined the fragility of Europe's security environment.

Empirical experience shows that even the wealthiest states cannot rely exclusively on professional forces. Most countries, whether NATO members or neutral states such as Austria and Switzerland, maintain substantial reserve components, often relying on volunteer reservists who combine civilian occupations with periodic service. Their role is not only to reinforce professional troops, but also to preserve the essential link between the armed forces and society (Hegedűs, 2019, pp. 46–48). In Central Europe, adapting to terrorism, hybrid and cyber threats,

irregular migration, and Russian expansionism requires the development of professional, flexible forces and territorially based reserves capable of rapid deployment.

This article, therefore, examines the principal attributes of building active reserves within the Visegrád Group countries and Romania, deliberately excluding remuneration, as economic conditions and purchasing power vary widely across the region. The data and legal information presented in this study are valid as of 31st August 2025; subsequent changes are not reflected.

1 THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech Active Reserves (aktivní zálohy – AZ) trace their origins back to 1999, when the establishment of the first volunteer groups began. From that year onward, numerous citizens participated in voluntary training exercises, demonstrating a commitment to national defence and laying the groundwork for a structured reserve system. A pivotal development occurred with the adoption of Act No. 585/2004 Coll., on Defence Duty and Its Provision (the Defence Act), which abolished compulsory military service while simultaneously establishing the AZ within the Czech Armed Forces (Armáda České republiky – AČR) (585/2004 Sb. Branný zákon, 2004, Sec 1 [7], Sec. 5). This legislative reform not only built upon the earlier volunteer reserve system but also marked a significant step in the professionalisation of the AZ. By 1st January 2004, fourteen infantry companies – transformed from former guard units¹ – had already been operational, alongside seven additional units integrated within combat formations (Aktivní záloha slaví ..., 2024). The evolution of the system continued with the enactment of Act No. 45/2016 Coll., on the Service of Reserve Soldiers (the Reserve Service Act), which provided a comprehensive legal framework governing the service of reserve personnel. This Act clearly defined the conditions for enrolment in the AZ. It specified the rights and entitlements of reservists during their service, representing a significant milestone in the ongoing development and professionalisation of the AZ (45/2016 Sb. Zákon o službě vojáků v záloze, 2016 [hereinafter: 45/2016 Sb.]).

A significant milestone for the AZ occurred in February 2016, when the AČR deployed the first AZ member to Afghanistan – a physician serving in a local military hospital's emergency department, treating severely bleeding adults and wounded children (Sattler, 2019). Since 2019, AZ personnel have been increasingly deployed on international missions, including peacekeeping operations in Slovakia and Lithuania in 2024. They have repeatedly demonstrated readiness to operate alongside professional soldiers, and have contributed to flood relief in 2013, public health efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to border protection against irregular migration (Aktivní záloha slaví ..., 2024).

Building on this operational experience, AZ personnel form a core component of the Territorial Forces, officially established on 1st July 2019 in response to emerging security threats and the need to strengthen national defence (Slavnostní Nástup ..., 2023). As the former Defence Minister – Lubomír Metnar – emphasised, the planned changes in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and AČR structure reflected the current security environment and potential threats facing the Czech Republic, particularly developments from the east in relation to Russia (Otto, 2019). In 2023 the Territorial Forces comprised over 4,000 Active Reservists and more than 500 professional soldiers (Teritoriální síly, n.d.), with planned increases in professional personnel from 423 in 2023 (Obrana České republiky ..., 2022, p. 14), to 520 in 2024 (Obrana České republiky, 2023, p. 16), and 593 in 2025 (Obrana České republiky ..., 2024, p. 16).

¹ See: Historie a vývoj Aktivní zálohy (3): Vznik krajských rot AZ (vývoj v roce 2004) (Kuthan, 2015).

Their main tasks include the defence and protection of Czech territory, providing mobilisation support to the AČR, and maintaining internal security. Command is exercised by the Territorial Forces Headquarters (Velitelství teritoriálních sil – VeTerS), initially established as the Territorial Command and expanded on 1st January 2023. VeTerS reports to the Chief of Defence during peacetime and to the Operational Command in situations of national threat or war. Through the integration of AZ and professional personnel, the Territorial Forces enhance operational readiness, resilience, and the AČR's capacity to respond to both domestic and international contingencies (Teritoriální síly, n.d.).

On 20th December 2023, the Czech Government made a significant decision by approving the *Concept for the Development of the Army of the Czech Republic 2035* (Čapek, 2023). This approval paves the way for the expansion of the AČR to 30,000 professional soldiers and 10,000 AZ by 2030, including provisions for reservists to serve beyond the age of sixty. The strategy prioritises for development and operational integration of the AZ as a core component of the AČR, emphasising readiness, deployability, and sustainability. Key measures include streamlining the transition of retiring professional soldiers into the reserves, establishing territorial defence battalions to defend it, and developing support elements for the Territorial Forces, with full operational capability expected by 2035. According to the document, the AZ forms a critical framework of trained personnel, reinforcing professional units in peacetime and serving as the foundation for wartime expansion. A systematic career and professional development program will ensure skill maintenance and unit cohesion up to the battalion level. By enhancing self-sufficiency in training and leveraging reservists to address capability gaps, the AČR aims to strengthen both its operational flexibility and resilience, while maintaining a vital and close integration with civilian society (Koncepce Výstavby ..., 2024).

The admission of reservists into the AZ follows, by analogy, the provisions of the Reserve Service Act, on the Service of Soldiers in the reserve. Neither political nor trade union membership, nor the pursuit of other gainful employment constitutes an obstacle to their inclusion (45/2016 Sb., 2016, Sec. 33 [1]). Eligibility is determined both by the needs of the armed forces and by the fulfilment of defined entry requirements. Applicants must be citizens of the Czech Republic, at least eighteen years of age, medically fit, and free of criminal convictions. Furthermore, they are required to provide a sworn statement confirming that no criminal charges have been brought against them and that they are not subject to probation resulting from a conditionally suspended prosecution. A minimum of secondary education with an apprenticeship certificate is required. Candidates must also declare that they do not support or publicly sympathise with movements aimed at suppressing human rights and freedoms or inciting national, religious, or racial hatred. Admission is conditional upon taking the military oath. Membership in the AZ is granted for a maximum of five years, with the initial term usually set at two years; it may be renewed in line with the needs of the armed forces and at the request of the reservist (Podmínky zařazení do zálohy, 2025). Pursuant to the Defence Act, on Compulsory Military Service and Its Implementation (the Conscription Act), military service is performed until the age of sixty (585/2004 Sb. Branný zákon, 2004, Sec. 7).

The training of the AZ is conducted primarily through military exercises, with reservists called up for up to twelve weeks annually, depending on their assignment, level of preparedness, and professional skills. Those without prior military service must complete a six-week introductory training course at the Training Command – Military Academy Vyškov, consisting of four weeks of training and two weeks of compensatory leave. Upon request, reservists may complete the training in two separate phases, each with a duration of three weeks. A distinct category within the Active Reserve comprises specialists, such as medical personnel, who occupy designated professional roles. They complete their introductory training course, which lasts only half as long as that for other reservists, in a single continuous period. Periodic military

exercises take several forms: regular training with the assigned unit; qualification enhancement through Ministry of Defence programmes; participation in public events enhancing defence awareness; preparation for operational deployment; and volunteer exercises. Units follow a four-year training cycle based on the MoD's training guidelines and actual unit strength. In 2023, Territorial Forces units had a significant focus on platoon-level preparation to defend critical infrastructure, a crucial role in Czech national security. They also aimed to support the Police of the Czech Republic and the Integrated Rescue System, as well as prepared draft boards for potential mobilisation. At the same time, other service branches concentrated on realistic tasks and supporting AČR capabilities. In 2023, the MoD introduced career preparation into the system through updated courses for reserve unit commanders, focusing on decision-making, planning, and operational command. From 2025, the MoD plans to fully implement comprehensive career courses for all reservists (Cvičení AZ, 2025; Nástupní termíny AZ a DVC, 2025).

According to current legislation, members of the AZ may be deployed in operational service for up to nine months annually, which involves the direct fulfilment of Armed Forces tasks rather than training. Domestically, they can be assigned without consent to support rescue operations, respond to emergencies threatening lives, health, property or the environment, to reinforce the Integrated Rescue System and Police, guard facilities critical to national defence, or assist allied forces on Czech territory (Operační Nasazení, 2025).

Figure 1 shows the personnel levels of the Czech Active Reservists, 2005–2025, with a moving average trendline.

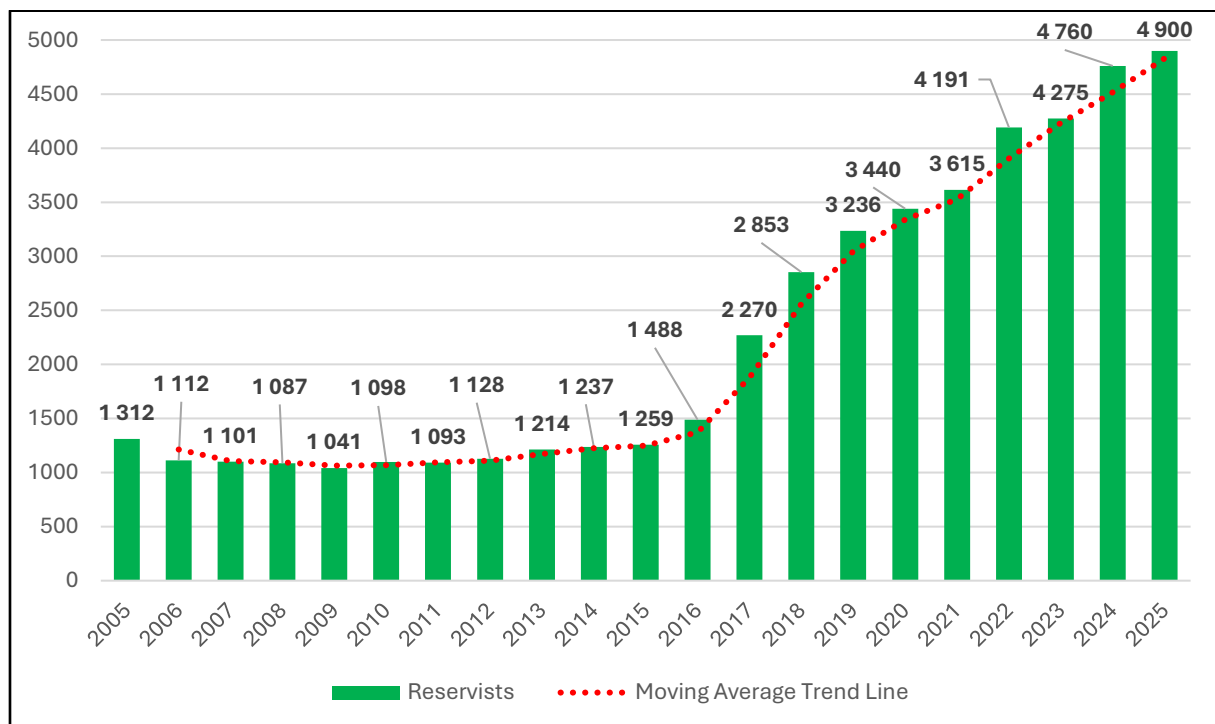


Figure 1 Personnel levels of the Czech Active Reserve, 2005–2025, with moving average trendline

Source: Author's compilation based on the chapter "THE CZECH REPUBLIC"; Obrana České republiky ... (2024), p. 16; Obrana České republiky ... (2025), p. 16; Vrbičová (2024); Vývoj skutečných počtu ... (2023)

The AČR currently deploy AZ members across fifty-seven units, encompassing combat formations, combat support, and combat service support elements, as well as Active Reserve Units within the VeTerS of all fourteen territorial self-governing regions.² These reservists serve either in infantry or territorial defence companies. They may also be assigned as specialists to military intelligence, the Castle Guard, or the Military Police headquarters in Prague, Olomouc, and Tábor. Furthermore, they operate within the headquarters and units of the Land Forces, Air Force, Special Operations Forces, Cyber and Information Forces, as well as other higher-level commands or units that are subordinated to AČR agencies, thereby maintaining a transparent chain of command and responsibilities (Přehled Jednotek AZ, 2025).

Abroad, deployment requires the explicit consent of the reservist and has already included participation in the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, Task Force Takuba in Mali, and NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States and Slovakia. This international cooperation underscores the global impact of the Czech Active Reserves, who have served both in staff and operational roles in these missions (Operační Nasazení, 2025).

In conclusion, the AZ in the Czech Republic, despite having roots dating back to 1999, only began to be systematically developed after 2005. A noticeable qualitative shift occurred in 2017, when the number of reservists started to increase significantly. This growth could be driven by two key factors: security threats emanating from the east and, more importantly, the establishment of improved conditions, a more supportive legal framework for the AZ, and the opportunity to participate in international missions. The latter option not only provides financial incentives but also offers travel opportunities, appealing to more adventurous personalities. Yet, the goal of recruiting 10,000 reservists by 2030 appears unattainable under current legislative and motivational (not solely financial) conditions. With the existing growth trends continuing – averaging at an annual increase of approximately 260 reservists between 2020 and 2023 – the AZ will reach only about 6,200 personnel by 2030, far below the planned 10,000. In this context, the projected figure of 4,900 reservists by the end of 2025, as set by the MoD, seems inconsistent with current trends.

2 HUNGARY

Unlike the Czech Republic's relatively modest model of active reserves, Hungary has pursued a more ambitious and territorially structured approach to developing its volunteer forces.

The Hungarian military volunteer reserve system (önkéntes tartalékos – ÖT) traces its origins back to 1999, when the Military Council of the General Staff adopted the volunteer reserve concept of deploying reservists only for peacekeeping missions in peacetime. However, this concept did not align with NATO principles, had limited operational efficacy, and, with the suspension of conscription, produced very few trained recruits; by 2010, only seventeen volunteers remained out of the original ninety-one (Kádár, 2009, pp. 47–48). The new defence leadership prioritised rebuilding the reserve system, embedding it in the Fundamental Law and the cardinal Defence Act.³ A decisive breakthrough came in 2017 with the creation of one hundred and ninety-seven territorial defence companies –one in every district – which restored

² The self-governing regions are: Central Bohemian, South Bohemian, Plzeň, Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem, Liberec, Hradec Králové, Pardubice, Vysočina, South Moravian, Olomouc, Zlín, Moravian-Silesia, and the capital Praha.

³ Provisions regarding volunteer military reserves are still found in the Fundamental Law (Magyarország Alaptörvénye [2011. Április 25.], 2011, Sec. XXXI. [2]), and the Act CXL of 2021 on National Defence and the Hungarian Defence Forces (2021. évi CXL. Törvény a Honvédelemről és a Magyar Honvédségről, 2021, Sec. 3 [18], 38, 40, 106 [8,10], 110 [10]).

links between the armed forces and society and enabled the reserve force to reach the parliament-approved strength of 8,000 by 2018 (Hegedűs, 2019, p. 51).

The amendment to the Defence Act that entered into force on 1st January 2011 restructured the volunteer reserve system by renaming the existing volunteer reserve service (önkéntes tartalékos – ÖT) as the volunteer operational reserve (önkéntes műveleti tartalékos – ÖMT) and introducing a new category, the volunteer defence reserve (önkéntes védelmi tartalékos – ÖVT). In the context of Russia's expansionist foreign policy, NATO once again prioritised collective defence, reinforcing the Alliance's eastern flank and requiring the affected member states to secure national approval for this policy (Ujházy, 2022, p. 79). A further reform, effective as of 1st January 2017, introduced the volunteer territorial defence reserve (önkéntes területvédelmi tartalékos – ÖTT), representing a strategic adaptation to the evolving security requirements (25/2016. [XII. 22.] HM rendelet, 2016, Sec. 37 [4]).

The most recent reform of the volunteer reserve system occurred in the summer of 2024. Based on Government Decree No. 137/2024 (28th June) on the Legal Status of Service Members (137/2024. [VI. 28.] Korm. rendelet a honvédek jogállásáról, 2024, Sec. 30 [b]), the Minister of Defence, Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky, issued Ministerial Decree No. 13/2024 (23rd July) on the Legal Status of Volunteer Reservists. As of 1st July 2024, the reserve force is formally recognised solely as composed of volunteer reservists (önkéntes tartalékos – ÖT), which abolishes the previous tripartite structure. While the legislation still contains references to the volunteer defence reserve (ÖVT) and the volunteer territorial defence reserve (ÖTT), it no longer treats them as distinct categories, and it explicitly abolishes the volunteer operational reserve (ÖMT) (13/2024. [VII. 23.] HM rendelet, 2024). This category previously represented the best-trained component of the Hungarian Defence Forces' reserves, composed primarily of former professional soldiers who served in specialised positions, crisis management tasks such as disaster relief or border protection, and, with consent, international peace operations (Ujházy, 2022, p. 80).

Since 2017, volunteer reserve companies (ÖTT) have been established in every district to ensure locally trained and deployable forces based on the principle of territoriality. Their training enhances both defence and disaster management capabilities, while also strengthening civil–military relations through community engagement. Most reservists are under forty, making the ÖTT both an immediate operational asset and a pool for recruiting NCOs, officers, and the operational reserve, in line with patterns observed in other NATO states. (Hegedűs, 2019, pp. 55–56; Ujházy, 2022, p. 81).

The ÖVT constitutes a unique dual legal status, unprecedented in Hungarian labour law and rare internationally. Recruitment is possible only through nomination by the Ministry of Defence Electronics, Logistics and Property Management Company (MoD ED Co. Ltd.), which formally employs reservists in peacetime. The MH assume authority only during training and activation. This concept reflects a hybrid civil–military arrangement: reservists perform civilian security duties as armed guards of military facilities under MoD ED Co. Ltd., while also serving as an army reserve for crisis situations. Beyond installation security, the force contributes to host nation support and disaster relief, highlighting its role as a flexible resource positioned between national defence and internal security (Ujházy, 2022, p. 80).

As mentioned above, the current regulations refer to reservists with the collective term of volunteer reservists (ÖT). The decree reveals that the ÖT is essentially subordinated to the Hungarian Defence Forces Territorial Defence Forces Command (Magyar Honvédség Területvédelmi és Hadkiegészítő Parancsnokság – MHTHP), more precisely, each headquarters of the territorial defence regiments (területvédelmi ezredek parancsnoksága) or other higher headquarters and the Director General of the Military National Security Service (13/2024 HM

rendelet, 2024, Sec. 24 [2], 24 [1], 61). Although the decree does not explicitly refer to the ÖVT, it nonetheless maintains a framework that enables volunteers to undertake security and protection duties, which in substance correspond to the functions previously associated with the ÖVT category (13/2024 HM rendelet, 2024, Sec. 1 [5]).

Volunteer reservist service in Hungary admits individuals over the age of eighteen who hold Hungarian citizenship, demonstrate good conduct, possess full legal capacity, and have completed at least primary education. Dual citizens may also apply if they hold Hungarian citizenship and a permanent address in Hungary. Non-citizens with a residence permit, a permanent address or place of residence, and certificates of an intermediate Hungarian language exam can apply for an enlisted position. Candidates to ÖT can have the right to apply to the forces even after serving a sentence for minor offences. In such cases, the competent authorities review the circumstances and may, in some instances, give permission to join.

The admission process includes a general medical examination and a brief psychological evaluation but does not include a separate physical fitness test. The authorities exclude candidates with severe health conditions, while former professional or contract soldiers who are not discharged due to health reasons are transferred directly without reassessment. The training comprises 12 modules delivered over 25 days, with 8-hour sessions that instructors can also schedule at weekends. Alternatively, reservists can attend the 50-day Basic Military Preparation Programme alongside future contract soldiers. Individuals discharged from military service within the last ten years complete only refresher training. The armed forces also call up reservists to specialised training, exercises, flood protection, or guard duties, and allow them to volunteer for international missions. (Gyakran ismételt kérdések, n.d.).

Volunteer reserve service can be established for a minimum period of two and a maximum period of five years (13/2024 HM rendelet, 2024, Sec. 9 [1]). Reservists can serve until they reach the retirement age, which is currently sixty-five years, and this age limit applies equally to both men and women (1997. évi LXXXI. törvény a társadalombiztosítási nyugellátásról, 1997, Sec. 18).

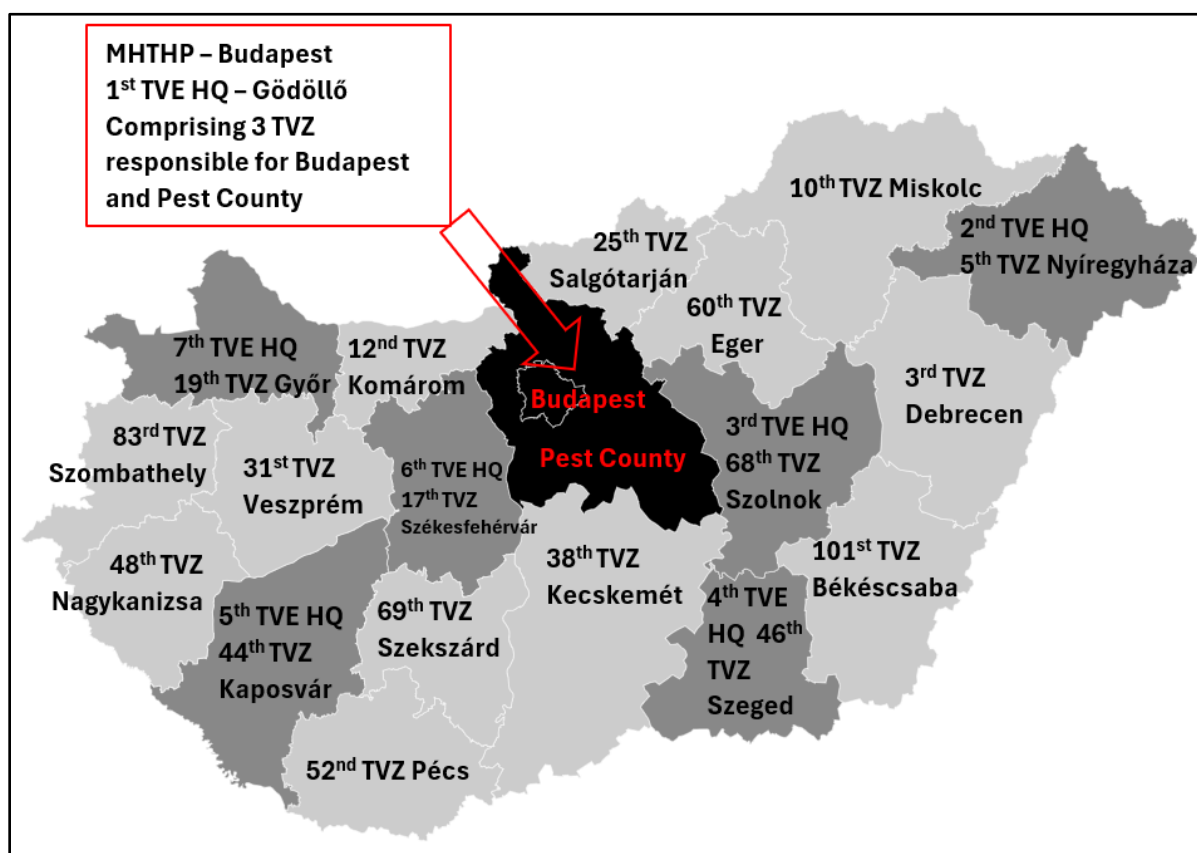
Since 2018, Hungary has officially declared the ceiling of its volunteer reserve force at 20,000 personnel (25/2018. [X. 31.] OGY határozat a Magyar Honvédség részletes bontású létszámáról, 2018, Sec. 2), an increase from the previous limit of 8,000 (35/2013. [V. 16.] OGY Határozat a Magyar Honvédség részletes bontású létszámáról, 2013, Sec. 2). This figure first appeared in the Military Balance 2018 published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2018, p.116) and has since been consistently reported as Hungary's declared strength of the volunteer reserve (IISS, 2025, p. 101).⁴ If we adopt the NATO working standard that an infantry battalion comprises typically 300–1,000 soldiers, the Hungarian Territorial Defence Battalions can be estimated to consist of approximately 600 reservists and professional staff each. With 21 TVZs established, their total strength would approximate 12,600 personnel. It is reasonable to assume that around 12,000 reservists serve within the territorial defence structure. Many of these reservists are officers and NCOs with previous active-duty experience, bringing a wealth of professional leadership to their roles. Hungary will most likely allocate the remainder of the declared 8,000 reservists to other branches of the armed forces, primarily for guard duties (e.g. MoD ED Co. Ltd.) and support roles within the MoD, universities, and the Military National Security Service. It is worth noting that, in addition to performing domestic

⁴ The Military Balance 2017 and 2015 state that Hungary has reserves of 44,000 reservists, of which 35,200 are in the Land Force (Army) and 8,800 are in the Air Force (IISS, 2015, p. 103; IISS, 2017, p. 124). However, these are not active reserves, but rather former soldiers who were discharged from professional or conscript military service and could be called up for service if necessary. These are therefore professional reserves. Additionally, Hungary strategically limited the number of active reserves to 8,000 people from 2013 to 2017 and increased it to 20,000 from 2018, reflecting its military policy.

tasks, volunteer reservists often participate in international peacekeeping missions (Molnár, 2021).

As of August 2025, according to the official website of the Hungarian Ministry of Defence, seven Territorial Defence Regiments (Területvédelmi Ezred – TVE) have been established and are operational under the command of the MHTHP, which is subordinated to the General Staff of the Hungarian Defence Forces (Magyar Honvédség Területvédelmi Erők Parancsnoksága, 2023).

Map 1 illustrates the current deployment of TVEs across the Hungarian counties, indicating their numbering and headquarters locations, as well as the numbering and locations of subordinate TVZs. Also, Table 1 presents the organisational structure of the TVEs, including the numbering and locations of their headquarters and subordinate Territorial Defence Battalions (Területvédelmi Zászlóalj – TVZ).



Map 1 County-Level Organisation of the Hungarian Territorial Defence Force
Source: Author's compilation based on the chapter "HUNGARY"

As shown in Map 1, TVZs are present in every county, while regimental headquarters are typically located in garrisons with long-standing military traditions. The map also illustrates the limited reinforcement of battalions in eastern Hungary, a deployment pattern that does not visibly support the original objective of enhancing deterrence against potential Russian aggression.

Table 1 Territorial Defence Regiments and Battalions of the Hungarian Defence Forces: Headquarters and Bases

TVE HQ / base	TVZ / base	TVE HQ / base	TVZ / base
1 st TVE / Gödöllő	1 st TVZ / Gödöllő 29 th TVZ / Gödöllő 30 th TVZ / Gödöllő	5 th TVE / Kaposvár	44 th TVZ / Kaposvár 48 th TVZ / Nagykanizsa 52 nd TVZ / Pécs
2 nd TVE / Nyíregyháza	3 rd TVZ / Debrecen 5 th TVZ / Nyíregyháza 10 th TVZ / Miskolc	6 th TVE / Székesfehérvár	12 th TVZ / Komárom 17 th TVZ / Székesfehérvár 69 th TVZ / Szekszárd
3 rd TVE / Szolnok	25 th TVZ / Salgótarján 60 th TVZ / Eger 68 th TVZ / Szolnok	7 th TVE / Győr	19 th TVZ / Győr 31 st TVZ / Veszprém 83 rd TVZ / Szombathely
4 th TVE / Szeged	46 th TVZ / Szeged 38 th TVZ / Kecskemét 101 st TVZ / Békéscsaba		

Source: Author's compilation based on Magyar Honvédség Vitéz Reviczky László 1. Területvédelmi Ezred (2022); Magyar Honvédség vitéz Vattay Antal 2. Területvédelmi Ezred (2022); Magyar Honvédség Krause Lajos 3. Területvédelmi Ezred (2022); Magyar Honvédség Dombay Miksa 4. Területvédelmi Ezred (2022); Magyar Honvédség Bauer Gyula 5. Területvédelmi Ezred (2022); Magyar Honvédség Sipos Gyula 6. Területvédelmi Ezred (2022); Magyar Honvédség Klempa Kálmán 7. Területvédelmi Ezred (2022)

According to the current Minister of Defence, the number of reservists has increased substantially since last summer, with more than 5,500 joining the ÖT, and one in ten of them becoming professional soldiers (MTI, 2025). This underscores that the recruitment of volunteer reservists remains a significant challenge for both the Hungarian Defence Force (HDF) and the MoD. The fact that at least 550 of these new reservists have become professional soldiers highlights the constant and urgent demand for personnel in the HDF and ÖT. At the same time, it is necessary to consider that soldiers who, for various reasons, left the professional army and subsequently, for financial,⁵ professional or other reasons, joined the ÖT are gradually ageing. They are now exceeding the age of sixty-five, which is determined as the maximum possible age for service in the ÖT. At the same time, the reinforcement of battalions in eastern Hungary remains limited, a deployment pattern that, despite the original intention of ensuring defence and deterrence against potential Russian aggression, does not visibly support that objective.

3 POLAND

While Hungary's reform emphasises county-level territorial defence battalions, Poland has gone even further by establishing the Territorial Defence Forces (Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej – WOT) as a full-fledged service branch within its armed forces.

“Territorial defence and NATO membership are central pillars of Poland's defence policy. The primary focus of the 2017–32 defence concept is to prepare the armed forces to deter Russian aggression” (IISS, 2025, p. 121). Poland's current National Security Strategy,

⁵ The financial incentive may be distorted by the fact that former professional soldiers or police officers who retired before 2011 and receive the reclassified “service allowance” are required to pay a 15% personal income tax on this benefit, regardless of their participation in voluntary reserve service. Serving at least two months annually as a volunteer reservist may reduce other social security contributions, but does not exempt them from income tax obligations, as personal income (333/2011. [XII. 29.] Korm. rendelet a korhatár előtti ellátás, a szolgálati járandóság, a balettművészeti életjáradék és az átmeneti bányászjáradék eljárási szabályairól, valamint egyes kapcsolódó kormányrendeletek módosításáról, 2011, Sec. 2–6).

effective since 12th May 2020, explicitly designates Russia as the primary security threat. It states that “[t]he most serious threat is the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation, pursued also by means of military force” (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, 2020, p. 6). It is important to note that the 2013 *White Book on National Security of the Republic of Poland* already addressed the regional dimension of European security. Moreover, Russia’s foreign policy doctrine and military-strategic orientation, which were considered unfavourable for Poland, reflect an interest in power dominance without regard for its neighbours (*Biała Księga Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* 2013, 2013). These policies had a direct impact on Poland’s security and should be a cause for concern. Relations with the Russian Federation constitute a significant issue that undoubtedly played a fundamental role in shaping the 2014 security strategy (Kutěj, 2015, p. 50).

Given Russia’s ongoing aggression toward Ukraine – which escalated into a full-scale military invasion on 24th February 2022 – and Poland’s adverse historical experiences with Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, it is crucial to understand that no current or future Polish government is likely to reassess its stance toward the Russian Federation and its allies. The Polish government reaffirms this position in the proposed new National Security Strategy of Poland, adopted on 25th June 2025 (Polish government adopts ..., 2025). It is no coincidence that Poland celebrates the Feast of the Polish Armed Forces, a national holiday observed annually on 15th August, commemorating the 1920 victory over Soviet Russia in the Battle of Warsaw during the Polish-Soviet War (Poland set for ..., 2025).

The draft of Poland’s new security strategy emphasises building territorial (active) military reserves by enhancing state resilience – particularly in protecting the population, ensuring civil defence, and safeguarding critical infrastructure and services. It also aims to establish a system of general defence, strengthen civil society and civic education, and reinforce national identity and social cohesion, all of which underpin the population’s determination to defend the state (*Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego* ..., 2025).

Based on the above, it can be stated that building active territorial reserves is vital for Poland and, therefore, on 25th April 2016, former Polish Defence Minister Antoni Macierewicz announced the establishment of the Territorial Defence Forces (WOT), marking a significant development in Poland’s defence policy.⁶ The Polish Ministry of National Defence closely linked the initiative to the country’s geopolitical position and the perceived threat from Russia (Defence minister signs ..., 2016). The initial plan envisaged a force of 35,000 personnel. Poland aimed to establish the first three Territorial Defence Brigades (*Brygady Obrony Terytorialnej* – BOT), which were to be operational by early 2017, with the ambitious goal of achieving full nationwide coverage by 2019 (Hegedűs, 2019, p. 49).

On 18th March 2021, at the WOT Headquarters in Zegrze, Defence Minister Mariusz Błaszczak announced the creation of three new brigades – the 18th Capital (Warsaw), 19th Nadbużańska (Chełm), and 20th Przemyśl (Przemyśl) – to be completed by year’s end, in regions of strategic importance with high public interest (Raszewski, 2021). This expansion from fifteen to eighteen brigades marked a milestone, as WOT grew from approximately 7,000 in 2018 to over 27,000 soldiers by 2021 (23,000 reservists and 3,700 professionals), with projections to 30,000, despite COVID-19 disruptions (*Wojsko Polskie coraz* ..., 2021). Six additional light infantry battalions were added, while the target strength remains 53,000 troops – 48,000 reservists and 5,000 professionals (Plan budowy WOT, n.d.; *Struktura i zadania*, n.d.).

⁶ It is essential to note that Poland’s reserve system was institutionalised long before the creation of WOT (*Ustawa z dnia 21 listopada 1967 r. o powszechnym obowiązku obrony Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, 1967).

WOT, the fifth branch of the Polish Armed Forces (alongside the Land Forces, Air Force, Navy, and Special Forces), is an integral component of Poland's national defence capability, significantly enhancing the country's overall military potential (Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 2022 r. o obronie Ojczyzny, 2022, Act. 15 [hereinafter: Ustawa ...]). The establishment of this new branch, a significant undertaking, has proceeded in a phased and systematic manner, demonstrating the meticulous planning and implementation of the initiative. The final WOT structure is currently expected to consist of twenty brigades – one in each of Poland's sixteen provinces. The exception is the Mazovian Voivodeship, which hosts three brigades (5th and 6th Masovian BOTs and 18th Capital BOT), the Lublin Voivodeship (2nd Lublin and 19th Nadbużańska BOTs) and the Subcarpathian Voivodeship (3rd Subcarpathian and 20th Przemyśl BOTs), each hosting two brigades due to its size and strategic importance. According to the official website of WOT, two BOTs (15th Lubusz and 17th Opole BOTs) are currently in progress (Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej ..., n.d.).

Overall, in 2016–2018, the Territorial Defence Force Command (Dowództwo Wojsk Obrony Terytorialnej – DWOT) was established in Warsaw, and the process of forming three BOTs in the Podlaskie, Lublin, and Subcarpathian voivodeships began. In 2017–2019, the formation of three additional BOTs deployed in the Warmian-Masurian and Masovian Voivodeships was initiated, and a Mobile Training Team (Mobilny Zespół Szkoleniowy – MZSz) was established in Warsaw.⁷ By the end of 2020, further BOTs were formed and deployed in the following voivodeships: Pomeranian, Kuyavian-Pomeranian, Łódź, Holy Cross, Lesser Poland, Greater Poland and Silesian (Plan budowy WOT, n.d.).

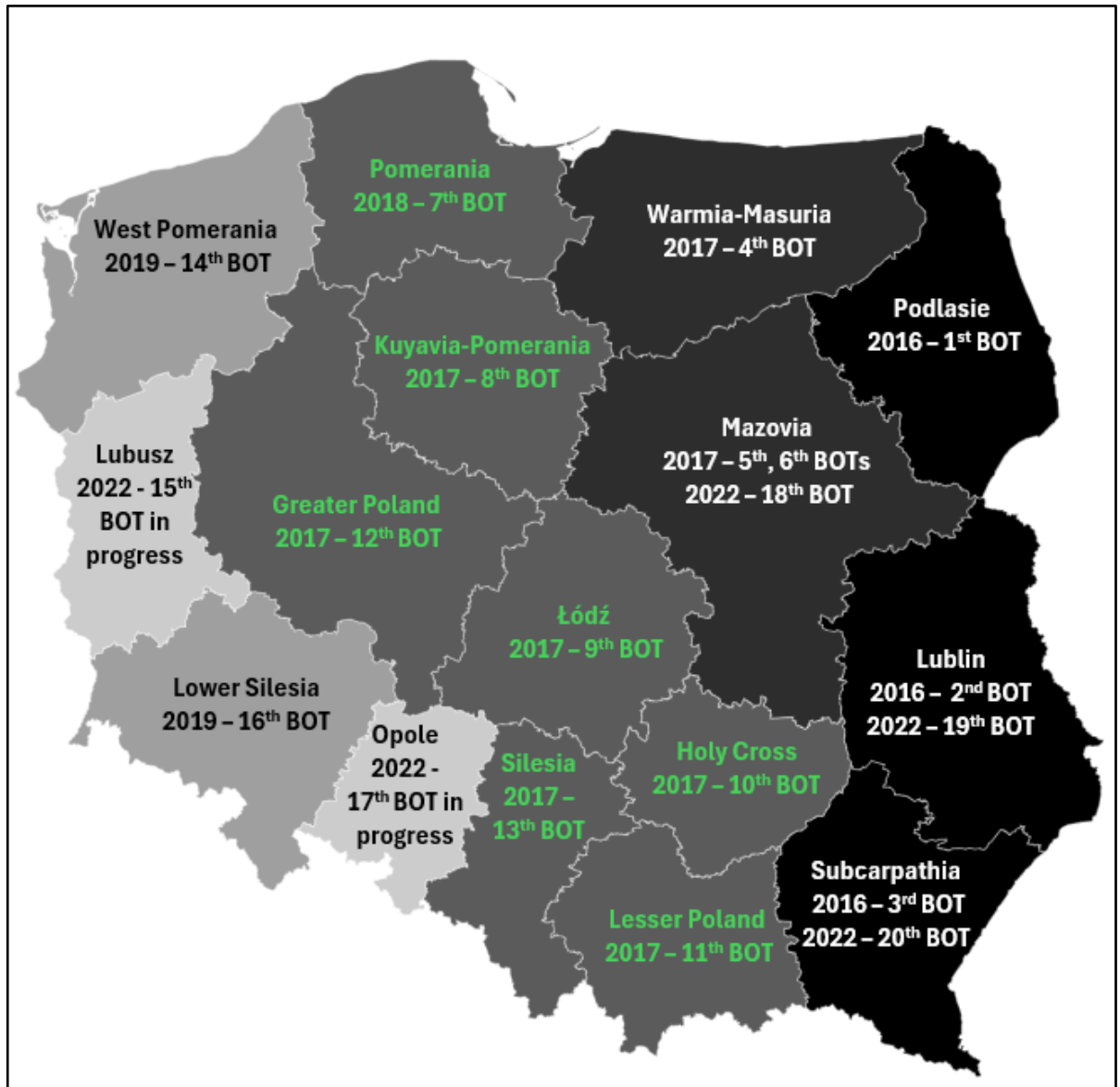
The Military Recruitment Centre (*Wojskowe Centrum Rekrutacji* – WCR) corresponding to the applicant's place of permanent residence processes applications to join WOT. The Ministry of National Defence advises prospective candidates to first contact their local WCR. An application may be submitted in person at the relevant WCR or electronically through the national ePUAP platform. This process includes several key steps: establishing an initial contact with the WCR, submitting the application, being assigned a date for conscription procedures and the recruitment commission, undergoing medical and psychological assessments, receiving an assignment to a WOT unit, and finally attending basic military training (Jak krok po kroku ..., n.d.).

The Act of 11th March 2022 on the Defence of the Homeland, Journal of Laws 2022, item 655 governs service in WOT. As the principal legal framework for Poland's national defence, this Act imposes the fundamental obligation to defend the state on citizens, prescribes age requirements, and defines the forms of military service, including Territorial Military Service. The Act allows individuals to serve from the age of eighteen until the end of the calendar year in which they turn sixty; for non-commissioned and commissioned officers, it extends the upper limit to sixty-three (Ustawa ..., 2022, Sec. 4). The law clearly identifies who may enter military service. Eligible candidates must hold Polish citizenship, maintain an impeccable reputation, and demonstrate both physical and psychological fitness for service. The law excludes individuals convicted of intentional crimes, assigned to alternative service, or exempted from compulsory service during mobilisation or wartime. It also bars those who already hold an organisational or mobilisation assignment to militarised units. Educational qualifications play a significant role in military service eligibility. They are an additional prerequisite and vary according to the military corps in which the individual seeks assignment. Candidates for officer positions must hold a higher education degree, whereas those aspiring to NCO posts must possess at least secondary or vocational secondary education. For service in

⁷ See: Vojenka, 2022; *Mobilne Zespoły Szkoleniowe*, n.d.

the enlisted corps, basic education suffices, provided that the Armed Forces identify a need for supplementation (Ustawa ..., 2022, Sec. 83).

Map 2 illustrates the implementation stages of WOT, showing the development timeline of the brigades and their status across the Polish voivodeships, with names, brigade numbers, and starting year of formation indicated. Also, Figure 2 shows the personnel levels of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces, 2018–2025, with a moving average trendline.



Map 2 Implementation stages of WOT

Source: Author's compilation based on the chapter "POLAND"; *Plan budowy WOT* (n.d.); *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej ...* (n.d.)

As shown in Map 2, the WOTs are concentrated along Poland's eastern border. At the same time, their presence gradually diminishes westwards, with brigades along the borders with Germany and the Czech Republic still in the process of being established.

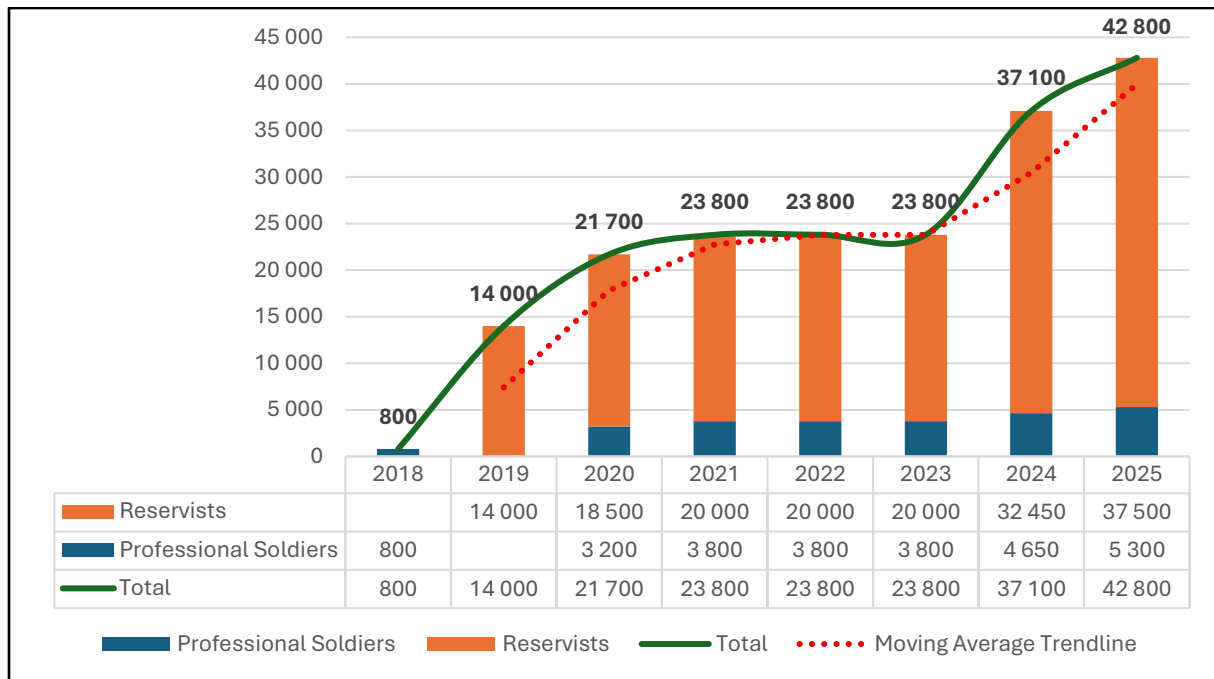


Figure 2 Personnel levels of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces, 2018–2025, with moving average trendline.

Source: *The author's compilation based on IISS (2025), p. 124; Pásztor (2024), p. 185*

The statutory length of Territorial Military Service lasts from one to six years, and soldiers have the power to extend their service if they request or consent to it. They serve within WOT units and command structures, but the authorities may assign them to duties anywhere in the country, regardless of the location of their home unit. Soldiers perform Territorial Military Service either on a rotational or on-call basis. In the rotational system, they train at least once per month for two consecutive days, usually during non-working time, and they remain on call for the rest of the period. In urgent circumstances, the armed forces may summon them to immediate service in response to national security threats, natural disasters, or crucial crisis management tasks, where their service is of utmost importance. Training requirements depend on prior military experience. Recruits without previous service complete a continuous sixteen-day initial training period, which culminates in the solemn military oath, a significant moment that marks their commitment to the service. In exceptional cases, they may divide this training into shorter modules completed within four months. By contrast, individuals who have already served and taken the oath complete an eight-day adjustment course that standardises their skills. After the initial training, soldiers engage in further specialist instruction related to their assigned military role. The law sets recruitment priorities and favours former professional soldiers, members of paramilitary or pro-defence organisations, and graduates of military-oriented educational programmes. Formal appointments specify both the position and the location of service. Commanders may also transfer soldiers, delegate them temporarily to other units, or direct them to participate in domestic operations and, with their consent, in international duties (Ustawa ..., 2022, Sec. 170–184).

Poland has emphasised the development of territorial reserves to address potential threats from the east, particularly from Russia and its ally Belarus. Since 2016, the country has strengthened its national defence through domestic capabilities, reinforced by NATO support, notably from the United States of America.

Reflecting this approach, fewer than 1% of Polish forces participate in foreign peacekeeping missions, indicating a deliberate policy to retain trained personnel domestically.

Deployments abroad are concentrated in regions – for example in Romania and Latvia⁸ – where they can deter potential Russian aggression (Pásztor, 2024, 182–188).

4 ROMANIA⁹

While Poland relies on a territorially organised reserve (WOT), Romania has opted for a nationwide system of volunteer reservists integrated into its regular armed forces.

The Romanian military volunteer reserves system within the Romanian Armed Forces (Forțele Armate Române – FAR) has been progressively restructured since the post-Cold War period into a mixed framework combining former career personnel placed into the reserve and a legislatively established category of volunteer reservists, with reforms expressly designed to improve readiness, interoperability with NATO standards, and the capacity to mobilise specialist civilian skills in crisis situations. This major shift was a response to the evolving nature of threats and the need for a flexible, well-trained reserve force that can act fast.

1st January 2017, when Act No. 270 of 10th November 2015 on the Status of Volunteer Reservists began to take effect, can be considered a breakthrough milestone in the creation of military reserves (Legea Nr. 270/2015 Din 10 noiembrie 2015 privind Statutul rezerviștilor voluntari, 2017 [hereinafter: Legea Nr. 270/2015]). Act. No. 270/2015 introduced a new category of military reserves, the volunteer reserves (rezerviștii voluntari – RV), aimed at attracting citizens without prior military experience who wish to contribute to national defence.¹⁰ Act 270/2015 sets out the status, rights, and obligations of RV, the contractual nature of their service, conditions for recruitment, and importantly, the circumstances under which they can be activated. The law is complemented by the Ministry of National Defence implementing orders that specify recruitment criteria, medical and educational prerequisites, and the procedural steps for enlistment.

Former professional personnel (officers, warrant officers [WO], NCOs and other career soldiers) can join the reserve after completing their active military service. The regulatory framework includes Act. No. 80 of 11st July 1995 on the Status of Military Personnel (Legea Nr. 80 Din 11 Iulie 1995 privind statutul cadrelor militare, 1995 [hereinafter: Legea Nr. 80/1995]) and subsequent amendments, as well as other statutes governing transition from active service to reserve status.¹¹ These legal instruments provide the basis for recall to active duty and define pension/compensation arrangements.

⁸ In 2025, Poland contributes 250 troops, organized as one reinforced mechanised infantry company, to the Forward Land Forces in Romania, and 200 troops, organized as one mechanised infantry company, to the Forward Land Forces in Latvia (IISS, 2025, p. 124).

⁹ While preparing this chapter, I drew upon consultations with Colonel (Ret.) Toma Ștefan Savu, with whom I had the privilege of serving in Budapest (Hungary) between 2016 and 2020 (Savu, 2025).

¹⁰ Military reserves in Romania have a continuous tradition dating back to the interwar period. During the post-war and communist eras, they were integral to the legislation and organisation of the armed forces (Șperlea, 2022).

¹¹ Act No. 322 of 6th November 2023 amending and supplementing Law No. 80/1995 on the Status of Military Personnel (Legea Nr. 322 Din 6 noiembrie 2023 pentru modificarea și completarea Legii Nr. 80/1995 privind statutul cadrelor militare, 2023), Act. No. 384 of 10th October 2006 on the Status of Professional Soldiers and NCOs (Legea Nr. 384 Din 10 octombrie 2006 privind statutul soldaților și gradaților profesioniști, 2006), Act. No. 446 of 30th November 2006 on the Preparation of the Population for Defence (Legea Nr. 446 Din 30 noiembrie 2006 privind pregătirea populației pentru Apărare, 2006), and Act. No. 138 of 20th July 1999 on the Remuneration and Other Rights of Military Personnel in Public Institutions of National Defence, Public Order and National Security, the Granting of Certain Salary Rights to Civilian Personnel in These Institutions (Legea Nr. 138 din 20 iulie 1999 privind salarizarea și alte drepturi ale personalului militar din instituțiile publice de apărare națională, ordine publică și siguranță națională, precum și acordarea unor drepturi salariale personalului civil din aceste instituții, 1999), as well as Methodological Norms of 31th March 2017 for the Application within the Ministry of National Defence of the Provisions of Law No. 270/2015 on the Status of Volunteer Reservists (Norme

The RV operates on the principle of voluntariness. County military centres conduct continuous recruitment and admit Romanian citizens – men and women – aged eighteen to fifty-five for officers and eighteen to fifty for soldiers and NCO. Candidates must meet specific requirements regarding age, physical and psychological fitness, education, and criminal record.¹² The selection process begins with application submission, followed by comprehensive medical and psychological evaluations, a physical performance test, and an interview with an evaluation board to assess motivation and suitability for military service. Candidates must fulfil general and specific recruitment criteria, have no final criminal convictions (unless rehabilitated or pardoned), not to belong to banned or incompatible organisations, avoid affiliations with religious groups that contravene public order or impede military duties, and demonstrate proficiency in written and spoken Romanian. Selection is mandatory for all candidates, irrespective of prior military service, and is conducted in line with ministerial procedures.

Upon selection, RVs engage in a continuous training program to maintain operational readiness. Initial contracts last four years, with subsequent contracts capped at three years. Reservists are trained to execute any mission at the level of active-duty personnel. The program includes an Initial Training Course, a fifteen-day foundational program for those without prior military experience, covering weapons handling, combat procedures, and military topography.¹³ RVs also undertake annual training of two to three weeks to update skills and familiarise themselves with modern equipment and tactics (Legea Nr. 80/1995; Legea Nr. 270/2015; *Reservist Voluntar*, n.d.).

The system provides a range of incentives, including a monthly allowance, salary during training, and social benefits, reflecting the recognition of reservists' service. Nevertheless, recruitment faces challenges due to labour market competition and the limited prevalence of a culture of volunteer military service. Ensuring the rapid and effective integration of reservists into active units during mobilisation remains an ongoing logistical and training challenge.

Despite active campaigns, Romania, like many Eastern European states, has faced recruitment and retention challenges in the post-2022 security environment. Media reporting and comparative analyses indicate that low unemployment and competitive private sector salaries, combined with demographic trends, complicate the attraction and retention of young recruits. The Ministry of National Defence has responded with marketing campaigns, periodic increases in advertised vacancies, and most importantly, experiments with adjustments to allowances and contractual conditions. As of the most recent call, 4,936 positions for volunteer reservists—covering officers, WOs, NCOs, corporals, and soldiers—have been made available across military units throughout the national territory. These factors, alongside the broader demographic and economic constraints, continue to limit the rapid expansion of the reserve in peacetime, underscoring the centrality of incentives and institutional outreach through county-level recruitment centres (Kahn, 2024; Ministerul Apărării Naționale, 2024).

Metodologice Din 31 Martie 2017 de Aplicare În Ministerul Apărării Naționale a Prevederilor Legii Nr. 270/2015 Privind Statutul Rezerviștilor Voluntari, 2017 [hereinafter: [Methodological Norms/2017]].

¹² The qualification requirements for performing a function in the RV differ according to category. Officer candidates must hold a completed university degree in a field compatible with their assigned branch or speciality. WO candidates are required to have a complete secondary education with a baccalaureate diploma and additional post-secondary studies, in some cases accompanied by a driving licence. NCO candidates must complete full secondary education with a baccalaureate diploma. In contrast, junior enlisted candidates need only to have completed compulsory general education, with specific posts requiring a driving licence (Methodological Norms/2017, 2017, Sec. 9).

¹³ To streamline training, FAR use manuals with two modules: (1) Basic Military Knowledge, covering organisation, discipline, training, survival, and equipment; and (2) Military Actions, applying this knowledge through weapons use, tactics, hybrid warfare, and operations (Ioniță - Brumaru, 2025, pp. 54–55).

According to the IISS data, Romania has maintained a reserve force of 55,000 soldiers alongside its professional military personnel since 2021. In 2014, the reserve numbered 45,000, having increased to 50,000 in 2015 and reached 53,000 by 2019. A comparative analysis suggests that among the security threats affecting Europe, the annexation of Crimea in particular may have influenced Romania's decision to expand its military reserve (IISS, 2025, p. 127; Pásztor, 2024, p. 198).

Unlike in the case of Hungary and Poland, no map is provided for Romania, as the volunteer reserve system is integrated nationwide rather than organised on a distinct territorial basis. The Romanian model therefore places greater emphasis on legislation, institutional mechanisms, and contractual arrangements than on geographically dispersed structures. In conclusion, the Romanian reservist system remains in transition, with reforms focused on ensuring the sustainability of the volunteer reserve and its effective integration into the country's broader defence posture.

5 SLOVAKIA

In contrast to Romania's nationwide model without a distinct territorial organisation, Slovakia has recently opted for a fundamentally new legal and structural framework through the creation of the National Defence Forces (Národné Obranné Sily – NOS).

The beginnings of building Slovakian active reserves can be dated back to 2018, when the first-ever active reserve training took place.¹⁴ The first training session of fourteen reserve volunteers took place from 14th to 25th May 2018 at the Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Protection Battalion in Rožňava, with the main part of it held at the Lešť military training centre. The next training session of active reservists took place at the Sereď Engineer Battalion Training facility between the 11th and 22nd June, and a significant growth with the expected participation of 43 active reservists was experienced (Training of active ..., 2018).

However, the interest in serving in the active reserves is not developing as expected by the MoD and the OS SR. At the end of 2023, there were only one hundred and fifty-four people in the active reserves, and by the beginning of 2024, only twenty-eight applicants had applied for basic training (Pásztor, 2024, p. 208). According to available information, approximately 200 reservists had participated in the training from its inception for active reserves by the end of 2024 (TASR, 2024). This unflattering situation required a reassessment of recruitment strategies, as well as the composition and job descriptions of the active reserves.

On 1st July 2025, Act No. 150/2025 Coll. on Certain Measures to Strengthen the Resilience of the Slovak Republic in the Field of Defence and Security, and on Conscription came into force (150/2025 Z. z. Zákon o niektorých opatreniach na zvýšenie odolnosti Slovenskej republiky v oblasti obrany a bezpečnosti, o brannej povinnosti, 2025 [hereinafter: 150/2025 Z. z., 2025]), which, according to the proponent – the Government of the Slovak Republic – represents a significant step towards strengthening the state's resilience in the field of defence and security. The new Act No. 150/2025 Coll. aims to create a new model of volunteer military reserves, replacing the former, according to application practice, dysfunctional system of so-called Active Reserves (aktívne zálohy – AZ), and expanding the

¹⁴ Act No. 370/1997 Coll. of 21st November 1997, on Military Service was the first to regulate the legal status of military reservists in the history of independent Slovakia (370/1997 Z.z. Zákon o Vojenskej Službe, 1997). This was followed by Act No. 570/2005 Coll. of 8th November 2005, on Conscription (570/2005 Z. z. Zákon o brannej povinnosti, 2005). In practice, reserve models – particularly volunteer and active reserves – underwent a systematic and progressive modernisation between 2019 and 2023. These changes were reflected in Act No. 319/2002 Coll. of 25th June 2002, on the Defence of the Slovak Republic (319/2002 Z.z. Zákon o Obrane Slovenskej Republiky, 2002), marking the evolution of the law.

possibilities for citizen involvement and the participation of members of security forces and rescue services, thereby empowering and involving the public in the country's defence. In accordance with Act No. 150/2025 Coll., the National Defence Forces (NOS) will consist of operational reserves (operačné zálohy – OZ), standby reserves (pohotovostné zálohy – PZ) and defence reserves (branné zálohy – BZ), and the inclusion in them shall be based on the principle of voluntariness.

Act No. 150/2025 Coll., also introduces a new system of military training and remuneration, which includes benefits, intending to attract not only young people but also professionals from the civilian sector (*Národné obranné sily*, n.d.). According to the proponent, a significant innovation is the strengthening of the state's ability to respond to crises, even outside of a state of war, encompassing natural disasters, industrial accidents, terrorist attacks, and migration waves. In times of war, reserves will be a key element of replenishing the Armed Forces of the Slovak republic (Ozbrojené sily Slovenskej republiky – OS SR). Act No. 150/2025 Coll. also introduces the so-called Gendarmerie Corps (žandársky zbor - ŽZ), whose task is to support the State Police Corps in ensuring public order, while members of the corps will have the status of public officials, thereby enhancing public security. Overall, the legal regulation – according to the proponent – aims to expand personnel capacities, increase the attractiveness of reserve service, and modernise the conscription system in line with current security challenges (Fico - Kaliňák, 2025, pp. 1–2).

According to Act No. 150/2025 Coll., volunteer reservists serving in NOS in Slovakia are divided into four main categories. OZ are former career soldiers who have agreed to enlist after the end of their professional service, individuals who have undergone volunteer military training, extraordinary service, or service in the other armed forces or financial administration. Members of the OZ primarily perform the tasks of the OS SR and those related to crisis management. PZ include individuals such as active members of other armed forces, citizens who have undergone volunteer military training, and public officials who have agreed to provide standby service, as well as registered citizens.¹⁵ The PZ primarily perform tasks related to crisis management and, secondarily, tasks associated with the OS SR. BZ are individuals who participate in volunteer training under a training agreement. Their tasks depend on necessity, and in a state of security it provides one-time training for citizens without prior military experience. Other reserves (ostatné zálohy) include individuals who are not included in the previous categories, such as those who have completed military reserve training or have been removed from operational or standby reserves. Other reserves are made up of citizens who, in a state of security, are not preparing to perform the tasks of the armed forces but are subject to military service duty by law (150/2025 Z. z., 2025, Sec. 1–7).

The qualification requirements for performing a function in NOS are as follows: for junior enlisted personnel secondary vocational education is required; for NCOs completed secondary general or vocational education is required; and for commissioned officers a second-cycle university degree is required. Volunteers must demonstrate their medical fitness through medical documentation prior to assignment to operational or standby reserves. Mental fitness is assessed through psychodiagnostics examination. Individuals who have been convicted of a military or intentional crime are not considered to be of good repute; reliability is excluded in cases of substance addiction, pathological gambling, or membership in extremist groups as well, and is demonstrated by a sworn statement. It is important to note that failure to meet these criteria may result in serious consequences, including disqualification. Medical and psychological fitness assessments are not required for individuals transferring directly from the

¹⁵ A registered citizen is a national of the Slovak Republic subject to military service and listed in the official register of registered citizens, or a foreign national who has voluntarily assumed the duty of national defence.

armed services, provided their discharge was not due to failure to meet these criteria (150/2025 Z. z., 2025, Sec. 8).

In general, a Slovak citizen subject to the duty of military service may join the NOS. This obligation applies to male citizens from 1st January of the calendar year in which they turn nineteen, provided they have permanent residence in Slovakia. Citizens who are not subject to mandatory military service, particularly women, may voluntarily undertake it under the same provisions. Military service generally ends on 31st December of the calendar year in which the individual turns fifty-five; in justified cases, and upon the citizen's request, it may be extended until the age of sixty-five (150/2025 Z. z., 2025, Sec. 44–47).

Members of the OZ and PZ are required to participate annually in fourteen days of training or the performance of tasks for the OS SR, in addition to six days of supplementary training – typically scheduled on weekends – and ten days of readiness duty. Altogether, this represents a maximum annual commitment of thirty days of training or task performance. BZ are obliged to complete fourteen days of training within a calendar year. The legislation permits the conclusion of service agreements for OZ and PZ reserves for a period of up to five years, with the option for renewal. In the case of the BZ, enlistment is based on an agreement specifically concerning the completion of training (150/2025 Z. z., 2025, Sec. 4–6, 13–14; *Národné obranné sily*, n.d.).

After the adoption of Act No. 150/2025 Coll., the pilot course of the BZ was conducted for a period of fourteen days, from June 10th to 24th 2025. The first cycle in June 2025 attracted forty-five participants – including the President and the Minister of Defence – and was followed by a second cycle in August. Public interest proved high, with 6,395 applications submitted within two months, of which 1,331 were accepted (*Odštartoval pilotný výcvik ...*, 2025) *Mladí a študenti ...*, 2025).

The newly established system of the National Defence Forces (NOS) holds significant potential, although its short period of operation makes any comprehensive evaluation premature. The exceptionally high public interest demonstrates this potential, but the limited participation in the operational and standby reserves points to a key challenge for the system's future viability. In conclusion, the Slovak model must still prove its long-term sustainability, particularly in terms of recruitment and retention, if it is to become a reliable pillar of national defence.

Taken together, the five national case studies highlight both common trends and significant divergences in the evolution of volunteer reserves across NATO's eastern flank, providing a basis for the comparative analysis that follows.

SUMMARY

In each of the discussed countries volunteer reservist service is open for the given state's citizens with good conduct and full legal capacity. In Hungary it is allowed to join the volunteer reservist system for dual citizens if the applicant has Hungarian citizenship and a permanent address in Hungary, or for anyone who is not a Hungarian citizen but has a residence permit, a permanent address, or place of residence in Hungary, and passes an intermediate Hungarian language exam an enlisted position can be applied for. In each assessed country applicants must have no final convictions for criminal, military, or intentional offences. In Hungary, unintentional offences for candidates to enlisted personnel can be considered individually, while in Romania, expunged or rehabilitated convictions may, in some instances, be treated as non-existent. In each of the discussed countries, the admission process usually involves a general medical examination and a simplified psychological examination, with no separate physical

fitness test. The authorities generally exclude individuals with critical health conditions, substance addiction, pathological gambling, or membership in extremist groups.

In the military reserves, the Czech Republic and Slovakia require recruits to hold at least a secondary vocational education, whereas Hungary, Poland, and Romania accept primary education as the minimum for enlisted ranks. Higher education remains mandatory for service in higher ranks or commissioned positions.

Based on the findings of the present study, the minimum age requirement for entry into volunteer reserve service is generally set at eighteen years, mostly corresponding to the age of those liable for military service. An exception is Slovakia, where citizens may join the reserves no earlier than 1st January of the year in which they turn nineteen. Maximum age limits for service vary across the region: in the Czech Republic, reservists may serve until sixty years of age; in Hungary, until sixty-five years; in Poland, reservists may serve until the end of the calendar year in which they complete sixty years of life, with the upper limit extended to sixty-three for both NCO and commissioned officers. In Romania, the limits are fifty-five years for officers and fifty years for soldiers and NCOs. In Slovakia, individuals may serve as volunteer reservists up to fifty-five years, with the possibility of extension to sixty-five upon a justified request.

Each of the post-socialist countries discussed has a rich history of establishing national military reserves. However, significant breakthroughs in this regard occurred at different times in each country. Hungary led the way, initiating reforms between 2010 and 2011. This was followed by the Czech Republic and Poland, which began their reforms in 2016. In all these countries, the creation of territorial forces was a central element, with units deployed across all administrative regions (counties, self-governing regions voivodeships,). Notably, Poland established the Territorial Defence Forces (WOT) as a separate branch of the military, distinct from the regular army. Despite these commonalities, there are significant differences among these countries in terms of the size and structure of their reserve forces. In the Czech Republic, the reserve forces are typically organised at company level, while in Hungary, they are organised at regiment level. Poland, with its strategic decision to establish WOT as a distinct branch of the military, as a part of the regular army, has taken a more expansive approach, organising its reserve forces at brigade level.

Romania began restructuring its reserve forces in 2017, moving towards a model that integrates reserves into the existing military structure. This approach, which aims to enhance the flexibility and responsiveness of the Romanian Armed Forces (FAR), demonstrates the country's commitment to adaptability and agility in its military strategy. At the other end of the spectrum, Slovakia has faced significant challenges in developing its reserve forces. After several unsuccessful attempts to attract volunteers, the country has been making a renewed effort to build its reserve forces since mid-2025. Interestingly, as part of the reform of military reserves, Slovakia decided to introduce a categorisation into three basic types of reserves (operational, standby, and defence). At the same time, Hungary abandoned a similar categorisation in 2024 (operational, defence, and territorial), and the other examined countries did not even consider such a classification.

Each of the assessed countries on NATO's eastern flank adopts a distinct approach to recruiting voluntary military reservists. What makes them similar, however, is a consistent preference for drawing recruits primarily from the ranks of former professional soldiers or other security services. Transition from active duty to reserve status represents a significant evolution within the military system, giving rise to what can now be conceptualised as "professional reserves". Thereafter, these states target the broader civilian population, employing a diverse range of motivational strategies and offering tangible benefits to attract younger generations.

The rationale is twofold: not only do these measures expand the pool of reserve personnel, but they also increase the likelihood that younger recruits will eventually pursue a professional military career. According to the current Hungarian Minister of Defence, this dynamic is already observable in Hungary.

Regarding the training of newly recruited reservists coming from the civilian sector, significant cross-national differences emerge. However, what is consistent is the adaptability of these training programs to the unique needs of each country. Slovakia conducts the shortest training program, consisting of fourteen days for its defence reserves (BZ), followed by Romania with fifteen days, and Poland with sixteen days. Hungary requires twenty-five days of training, while the Czech Republic provides the most extensive preparation, amounting to six weeks. The duration and frequency of refresher and continuation training vary significantly across the assessed countries, but the adaptability of these programs ensures that the armed forces are always prepared. In the Czech Republic, the period of reserve service can extend up to twelve weeks per year.

In contrast, in Poland, reservists are required to undertake two days of active service each month, totalling twenty-four days annually. Romania typically conducts such exercises over a period of two to three weeks annually. Hungary, on the other hand, does not have a fixed duration for refresher training; instead, reservists are called up based on the operational needs of the armed forces and the availability of volunteers. In Slovakia, on the other hand, legislation specifies that the regular training of operational reservist (OZ) and standby reservists (PZ) must be conducted for a minimum of twenty and a maximum of thirty calendar days per year, thereby providing a clearly defined framework for their annual training obligations.

A unique requirement in Poland, distinguishing it from the other evaluated states, is the eight-day initialisation training that former professional soldiers must undergo before they can integrate into the reserve system. In the case of other countries, this initial training for former soldiers is waived, like medical examinations, provided that the former professional joins the reserves immediately after completing active duty.

There are also differences in the duration of signed contracts. For instance, Hungary sets a minimum contract length of two years and a maximum of five years, while Poland allows for a maximum of six years. In contrast, the Czech Republic has a strict regulation, limiting the maximum period of operational assignment to ten months per year.

The recruitment websites of all the discussed countries on NATO's eastern flank are well-structured and informative. They provide clear guidance for prospective volunteers, offering detailed information on both professional military careers and operational or standby reserve service. These platforms outline eligibility criteria, training programs, and benefits, ensuring that candidates in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, regardless of their background or experience, are fully informed before committing to either reserve or active-duty roles (Brygady, n.d. , Csatlakozz a Magyar Honvédséghez, n.d.; Do Armády, 2025; Národné obranné sily, n.d; Reservistv voluntar, n.d.).

In conclusion, it is useful to assess the size of professional armed forces and military reserves in relation to both the total and working-age populations. Table 2 presents the absolute numbers and relative ratios, using Ukraine as a reference case, as its ongoing defence against Russian aggression provides a more contextually relevant benchmark than states such as Israel or the United States, whose security environments differ fundamentally from NATO's eastern flank.

Table 2 Military Manpower and Reserve Capacities Relative to Population in Selected Countries, with Ukraine as a Reference

Data name / Country	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Romania	Slovakia	Ukraine
[A] Military Reserves	4,900	20,000	37,500	55,000	330	1,200,000
[B] Active Military Forces	26,600	32,150	164,100	69,900	12,800	900,000
[C] Active Manpower (15%)	735	3,000	5,625	8,250	50	180,000
[C1] Active Manpower (10%)	490	2,000	3,750	5,500	33	120,000
[C2] Active Manpower (5%)	245	1,000	1,875	2,750	17	60,000
[D] Labour Force in millions (Population ages 15–64)	6.94	6.18	23.78	12.27	3.56	25.42
[E] Population total in millions	10.88	9.56	36.55	19.07	5.42	37.86
[F] Labour unactive in millions [E] - [D]	3.94	3.38	12.78	6.81	1.86	12.44
[G] Inactive population in % [F]	36.24%	35.39%	34.95%	35.70%	34.30%	32.85%
[H] Labour Force in % [D]	63.76%	64.61%	65.05%	64.30%	65.70%	67.15%
[I] Active Military-to-Population ratio in %	0.24%	0.34%	0.45%	0.37%	0.24%	2.38%
[J] Reserves-to-Population ratio in %	0.05%	0.21%	0.10%	0.29%	0.01%	3.17%
[K] Reserves-to-Active Military ratio in %	18.42%	62.21%	22.85%	78.68%	2.58%	133.33%

Source: Author's compilation based on present study; IISS (2025), pp. 81, 101, 121, 127, 131, 203; World Bank Open Data (2025). Notice: Active manpower denotes the estimated deployable portion of the reserve at peacetime readiness assumptions (15%, 10%, 5%)

In absolute terms (row A), Romania maintains the largest reserve component among the examined states (55,000), followed by Poland (37,500), Hungary (20,000), the Czech Republic (4,900), and Slovakia (roughly 330). However, when reserves are considered relative to the size of the standing professional force (row B), Romania stands out with the strongest capacity for reinforcing the regular army in an emergency, boasting a reserves-to-active ratio of just under 80%. This unique position is followed by Hungary (more than 62%). Poland and the Czech Republic exhibit ratios of around 20%, while Slovakia's ratio is significantly lower (below 3%). A different perspective emerges when comparing reserve numbers to the active manpower – i.e., the trained and immediately deployable portion of reserve forces maintained during peacetime (Plăvițu, 2016, p. 222). On this measure, Romania again leads, followed by Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It should be emphasised that this calculation assumes an optimistic 15% peacetime deployability rate; lower readiness (10% and 5%) is more realistic for deployable figures (row C, C1, C2).

The comparative figures in Table 2, including the reference to Ukraine, denote not only numerical differences but also structural approaches. They encourage reflections on the strategic role of active reserves, the types of training and refresher courses necessary to sustain their effectiveness, and the broader question of how reserve systems are expected to complement professional armed forces during times of crisis. The inclusion of demographic data (rows D–F) and calculated ratios (rows G–K) positions these figures within a broader societal context, enabling an assessment of how the balance between professional personnel, active manpower, and reserves corresponds to population size and labour force availability.

The comparative analysis of reserve systems in the Visegrád Four and Romania demonstrates that, while all five states abolished conscription and professionalised their armed forces, they have pursued markedly different strategies in rebuilding their reserve components. Poland and Romania stand out for the scale of their reserves: Poland by integrating the Territorial Defence Forces (WOT) as a separate service branch, and Romania by steadily expanding its volunteer reserve in response to external threats, marked most notably by the annexation of Crimea. Hungary has established a territorially structured reserve network (TVE/TVZ) that covers every county, although uneven reinforcement in the eastern regions limits its potential to meet the stated deterrence objectives. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, by contrast, have maintained smaller systems. The Czech active reserves (AZ) remain modest

in size but provide a reliable, contract-based model. In contrast, Slovakia has only recently introduced its National Defence Forces (NOS), which generate high levels of public interest but are too new for a reliable assessment.

From a practical perspective, Poland and Romania currently demonstrate the strongest capacity to mobilise significant manpower in an emergency, while Hungary illustrates the potential of territorially embedded structures, albeit with room for optimisation. The Czech and Slovak cases underscore that smaller states face inherent challenges in attracting and retaining reservists, making recruitment incentives and sustained political support indispensable. It is therefore no coincidence that Poland and Romania, as the two states with the most substantial reserve capabilities, jointly initiated the establishment of the Bucharest Nine (B9) in 2015, which has since become a key regional platform for coordinating NATO's security concerns on the eastern flank.

Beyond institutional frameworks and material incentives, the effectiveness of reserve systems also depends on the degree of patriotism within society, interpreted as a sense of national commitment and civic responsibility. This factor shapes citizens' willingness to defend their homeland with arms if required. Equally important is the personal example set by political and societal leaders, whose visible engagement can significantly influence public motivation and the broader legitimacy of reserve service.

Overall, the study suggests that the most effective reserve models combine territorial organisation, steady recruitment, and clear legal frameworks, while also ensuring adequate training and incentives to guarantee readiness. NATO's emphasis on resilience and civil preparedness provides an additional rationale for strengthening national reserve systems, particularly in light of the enduring security risks on the Alliance's eastern flank.

Finally, it can be asserted that the NATO member states' commitment to allocate an additional 1.5% of GDP – including, among other objectives, to “ensure our civil preparedness and resilience” – provides a strong rationale for intensifying and streamlining the development of military reserves (NATO, 2025, Sec. 3). These reserves, being a crucial component of national defence, play a significant role in enhancing the overall resilience of a state.

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