

REORGANIZATION OF THE NATIONAL GUARD: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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At its meeting on February 26, the Ministerial Council of the Republic of Cyprus decided to cut military service by 10 months to a total of 14 months, in the context of a comprehensive plan for the modernization and reorganization of the National Guard, produced by the Ministry of Defence. In his statements following the meeting of the Council, Defence Minister, Fokaidis argued that the reduction of military service will not adversely affect the operational capacity of the National Guard; on the contrary, argued the Minister, the reduction of military service shall enhance the National Guard's operational capacity and combat effectiveness, given the recruitment of contract professional soldiers.¹ The current article will briefly shed out the main elements of the government-pursued reorganization of the National Guard and will address the prospects and challenges of the particular endeavour.

According to publicly available information, the plan for the modernization and reorganization of the National Guard spins around three main pillars: a) the restructuring of the force that will produce a new and more efficient organizational structure; b) the implementation of armament programs for the three branches of the National Guard (Army, Air Force, Navy) and c) the hiring of contract professional soldiers which will transform the National Guard into a semi-professional organization.² The Minister of Defence has forcefully argued that reducing military service will not weaken the National Guard's operational capability – on the contrary, it will strengthen it, because the specialisation and experience that professional soldiers can acquire enhances their combat skills and adds value to the use of modern weapon systems."³

The decision of the Ministerial Council has sparked reaction from the opposition parties with concerns made with regards to the timing of the decision, as well as raising questions as to whether the requirements set out by the General Staff had been met. Several reports allege that the decision, as put forward by the Ministry of Defence and was approved by

¹ 'Reduction of military service to 14 months', *Philenews* (In Greek), available at <http://www.philenews.com/el-gr/top-stories/885/300952/meiosi-tis-stratitotikis-thiteias-stous-14-mines> [accessed 18 March 2016].

² '14-month military service in the National Guard', *Kathimerini* (Cyprus Edition), available at <http://www.kathimerini.com.cy/index.php?pageaction=kathimerini&modid=1&artid=232678> [accessed 18 March 2016].

³ 'Government cuts army service (Update 2: adds party reactions)', *Cyprus Mail*, available at <http://cyprus-mail.com/2016/02/25/government-cuts-army-service/> [accessed 18 March 2016].

the Ministerial Council, does not meet the requirements set by the National Guard's General Staff.⁴ Specifically, reports refer to the gradual reduction of military service, the phased recruitment of professional soldiers and the implementation of armament programs, as the requirements sets by the General Staff in the context of a comprehensive plan for the modernization and reorganization of the force.

To begin with, the new force structure is necessary due to significant structural weaknesses (number and location of facilities, duplicate divisions, among others) that do not serve the updated requirements of the National Guard. As regards the implementation of new armament programs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, Open Sea Vessels), some of which are in phase of execution, these will strengthen the Navy and Aviation Administration and is considered a positive development. Of those armament programs listed and from information publicly available the initial plan did not include any armament programs for the Army, except for upgrading existing defence systems and the enhancement of the National Guard's ISR capabilities⁵ (cameras, command and control facilities, communications systems) especially with regards to the Ceasefire Line, the development of autonomous telecommunications and satellite infrastructure and capabilities, especially in light of the looming privatization of the Cyprus Telecommunications Authority. If the occupational *status quo* remains unchanged, armament programs shall be implemented for the Army as well, in the next five years.⁶ It is our belief, however, that given the intent for force reduction more should have been implemented in regards to upgrading existing defence systems and implementing new armament programs, especially for the Army branch. The implementation of armament programs which would constitute true force multipliers (Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, advanced self-propelled artillery systems) should have been a sine qua non for the implementation of the Ministry's plan. Also, the recruitment and training of professional soldiers should have been in a fairly advanced stage and should take place in a phased manner and gradually. Phased hiring shall allow for the force to adjust smoothly to the organizational change and will not lead to the abrupt aging of the force. Given the experience with the simultaneous hiring of thousands of five-year contracted volunteers in the early 1990's which led to the abrupt aging of the force, this should have been a lesson learned and better practices should have been pursued with the gradual reduction of military service and the phased hiring of professional soldiers.

⁴ 'Reduction of military service with an express procedure', *Philenews* (In Greek), available at <http://www.philenews.com/el-gr/top-stories/885/301299/meiosi-tis-stratiotikis-thiteias-me-diadikasies-expres> [accessed 18 March 18, 2016].

⁵ Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance.

⁶ 'Government cuts army service'.

The government's decision has allegedly raised concerns in the National Guard. If the government has proceeded to such a decision without achieving common agreement with the National Guard and without having met all the prerequisites that the General Staff had set, then there is justified concern on the part of the National Guard. Unfortunately, there is no such culture where the officer publicly disclose his disagreement, even on an issue of such paramount importance. In short, the reduction of military service is not a negative development *per se*; its reduction, however, in the context of a comprehensive plan for modernization and reorganization should have met all requirements set by the General Staff and the military professionals⁷: phased reduction of service, gradual hiring of professional soldiers and implementation of force multipliers armament programs, especially for the Army branch.

⁷ See, for example, the article written by Lieutenant General (Ret.), Phivos Klokkaris, where several deficiencies in the pursued plan of the Defence Ministry are outlined: 'Turkish threat, National Guard and service', *Simerini* (17/-3/2016), available at <http://www.sigmalive.com/simerini/analiseis/316489/tourkiki-apeili-ethniki-froura-kai-thiteia> [accessed 18 March 2016].