Military Recruitment Across 4 NATO States in 2025:

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An Outline of Military Recruitment Across Four NATO Countries in 2025: a comparison between American, Canadian, Polish, and German responses

by Jonathan Lott

Developments in Ukraine and beyond have incentivized countries in Europe and beyond to modernize and grow their national military forces. Concerns that the United States may distance itself from Europe's defense have also European Army—an effort which is not yet advancing. Although the technologization of war has meant that tasks which once required many soldiers may now be accomplished with fewer personnel, there remains the need for a large, professional, on-demand force.

This necessity has led to a range of recruitment and retention efforts, as illustrated by a few recent strategies in Canada, Germany, the United States, and Poland.

The size of Canada's military has scarcely grown since they pledged in 2014 to augment military investment to 2% of their GDP. Suffering from a worsening recruitment crisis, Canada's move to loosen some entry requirements (and loosen presentation strictures) while investing in military families has not yet provided relief. The option for a one-year naval contract was not enough to boost enlistment rates much in the Royal Canadian Navy. The decision to allow some entrants up to their 60th birthday has enabled some to begin a second (or third) career in the military, a rare policy among Atlantic states.

Another notable problem is the bottleneck in training capacity: Canada can train only about 6,400 new personnel annually, inhibiting swift onboarding of motivated applicants. Retention also remains a pressing concern. Germany's Bunderswehr faces a similar dilemma. There is talk of introducing conscription to meet new goals of 230,000 active duty personnel (from 180,000 currently)—and talk of military registration (for potential future conscription)—but political currents after February's election may change matters. A new 4-day immersion opportunity in the Navy converts about 10% of participants into enlisted sailors. The phenomenon of declining enlistment is expected to continue.

Although the United States fields one of the world's largest volunteer forces, it, too, experienced shortfalls in 2022 and 2023, when only the Marine Corps and the Space Force met their recruitment targets. Some people blamed social changes for declining enlistment. Others pointed at lifestyle conditions in the military or at strict candidate standards. The government recently began offering waivers for certain health conditions and began trying to reframe the culture of military service, a challenge for many states today. A program was instituted in 2023, called "Future Soldier," with the goal "to help America's youth overcome academic and physical fitness barriers to service." The Department of Defense increased recruitment outcomes by 12.5% in 2024 and reached all of its branches' targets—except for the Navy.

A parallel to the U.S. situation can be seen in Poland's rapid military build-up. In contrast to other NATO members, Poland aims to soon spend 5% of its GDP on defense, and has begun a plan to more-than-double the size of its 2015 military to approximately 300,000. The country also launched efforts to train groups of (paid) volunteers in the basic responsibilities of defense, over a one-month summer immersion program. Salaries have been raised as well. Poland's military is now the largest among European NATO member states, and is still growing. An innovative and unique military startup effort has also begun to recruit & train a unit of Ukrainians within Poland for potential deployment to Ukraine.

All these states experience core problems relating to staffing a modern, professional military force, yet they react to these with somewhat different recruiting approaches. States are continually learning from each other to determine techniques which might be successfully adapted to their own military context.