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Quadrennial report on conscientious objection to military service

This document contains submissions by the Finnish Human Rights Centre (HRC¹, NHRI) to the Human Rights Council report on conscientious objection to military service.

Should you have any further questions or need for additional information, do not hesitate to contact us at leena.leikas@eduskunta.fi

The document can be published on the committee's website.

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¹ The Human Rights Centre represents the Finnish National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) in international NHRI cooperation and other international and European cooperation in human rights.

The NHRI comprises the Human Rights Centre, its pluralistic 39-member Human Rights Delegation, and the Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman. The institution complies with the UN Paris Principles and the Global Alliance of NHRIs (GANHRI) accredited it with A-status in 2014, 2019 and 2025.

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International legal framework, in particular new developments

Recommendations by Human Rights Treaty Bodies

1. The UN Human Rights Committee, in its latest observations in 2021 (CCPR/C/FIN/CO/7), was concerned that contrary to the Committee's previous recommendations to offer exemption from military and civilian service to also other groups of conscientious objectors than the Jehovah's Witnesses, the exemption was removed all together in 2019.
2. The Committee also noted with concern that the regular duration of alternative non-military service amounts to the longest period of military service and that, while such alternative service is under the direction of the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, military personnel still take part in relevant working groups and committees determining the nature and duration of alternative service. The Committee was also concerned about the insufficient dissemination of information about the right to conscientious objection and alternatives to military service.
3. The Committee recommended the State party to
 - (a) Ensure that alternatives to military service are not punitive or discriminatory in terms of their nature or duration and remain of a civilian nature, outside military command;
 - (b) Halt all prosecutions of individuals who refuse to perform military service on grounds of conscience and release those who are currently serving related prison sentences;
 - (c) Intensify its efforts to raise awareness among the public about the right to conscientious objection and the availability of alternatives to military service.
4. During the latest UPR-review (4th cycle) in 2023, Finland received similar recommendations. Those were merely noted and no further action was planned on them.
5. The Government's reply stated that
 - Finnish legislation provides a possibility to complete non-military service instead of conscription,

- the Act on the exemption of Jehovah's Witnesses from military service under certain conditions was repealed in 2019 to treat all religious communities in Finland the same, and

- the Government has noted the observations by the Human Rights Committee on the widening the exemption instead as well as the recommendations regarding the length and civilian nature of alternatives to military service.

Amendments to the Non-Military Service Act

6. On 23 May 2025, the Ministry of Employment and the Economy (of Finland) set up a cross-administrative working group (until 30 April 2026) to prepare amendments to the Non-Military Service Act, based on the current Government Programme and a report by a parliamentary working group. A draft law is due to be presented to Parliament in April 2026 after public consultations.
7. The Government's aim is to develop the non-military service and at the same time to link it more clearly to the comprehensive security concept, for example by enabling the use of non-military servicemen for civil protection tasks.
8. The recognised needs for legislative change relate, among other things, to clarifying the implementation of non-military service during serious disruptions to normal conditions and exceptional circumstances, changing from one form of service to another, and enabling exercises comparable to reserve refresher training for those liable for non-military service.
9. The questions relating to length of non-military service or the prosecution and eventual sentencing to prison of total objectors, most often performed in house arrest, seem not to be on the agenda of the working group.

Changes in age limits for placement in reserves

10. As of January 2026, the upper age limit for placement in military and civilian reserves were modified.
11. Currently the persons who have completed non-military service or who, after completing service under the Conscription Act or the Act on Women's Voluntary Military Service, have been transferred to civilian service, belong to the *civil reserve* until the end of the year in which they reach the age of 65 (previously 50).
12. Persons liable for non-military service who have not yet commenced the service or whose service has been interrupted, as well as persons liable for non-military service who no longer belong to the civil reserve belong to *supplementary reserve* until the end of the year in which they reach the age of 65 (previously 60)
13. These changes correspond to the changes for military reserve. Currently, regardless of the rank, persons belong to military reserve until the end of the

year in which they turn 65 years of age (previously 50 and 60, depending on the rank).

New Service Order

14. As of 1 January 2022 the Non-Military Service Act was amended to remove the possibility for a violation of *ne bis in idem*-principle.
15. Previously the Civilian Service Centre was obliged to order a person liable for civilian service to perform service again in a situation where the charge for refusal to perform civilian service had been finally dismissed by a court of law.
16. According to the amended Section 79 para 2: *If a court has dismissed the charge brought against a person liable for civilian service for refusal to perform civilian service as referred to in section 74, the person shall no longer be ordered to perform civilian service during peacetime.*

Remaining challenges

17. As it currently stands, the non-military service, for the most part, corresponds to the minimum requirements set for it in the established interpretation of the international human rights treaties.
18. The main human rights challenges regarding conscientious objection and non-military service in Finland relate to the length of the service (347 days vs. military service 165-347 days), the prosecution and eventual prison sentences or electronic monitoring sentences of total objectors and the investigation into one's conviction by the Conscientious Objectors' Examination Board during extraordinary service or partial or general mobilisation of the Defence Forces (Article 18 of the Non-Military Service Act).
