

THE NEW NATO POLICY ON RESERVES. A ROMANIAN PROJECT TO IMPLEMENT IT

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“The reservist is twice the citizen”
Sir Winston Churchill

Abstract: *Being under the influence and lessons identified from the existing conventional war in Ukraine, NATO came back to Collective Defense operations, bringing them into a new era of Article 5 that makes the Alliance to become ready today to face tomorrow’s challenges.*

The new focus on deterrence and defense to safeguard the freedom and security of Allies within 360-degree approach, as it is described in the respective concept for the Euro-Atlantic area (DDA), approved in 2020, necessitates two very important aspects. The first one concerns an adjusted balance between robust in-place forces and reinforcements to strengthen deterrence and the Alliance’s ability to defend. The second is related to build national and Alliance-wide resilience as a national responsibility and a collective commitment. Both aspects involve the existence of robust reserves and reserve forces with vital role played in NATO’s defense and deterrence, as well as in the whole spectrum of national and NATO’s defense structures.

This is why NATO has revised its policy on reserves (MC 0441/3 FINAL) at the end of 2024 to highlight their societal, operational and transformative value. Even being considered as a national responsibility and prerogative, the Alliance is keen to support the development of reserves through a whole-of-society perspective and to enhance their utilization in contributing to NATO’s core tasks, operations and missions. By following this new policy, all Allies, including Romania, should take all necessary measures to increase the level and importance of reserves and reserve forces inside their Armed Forces.

Keywords: Reserve policy; reserve forces; Voluntary Reserve; whole-of-society; resilience; human resource.

Introduction

Understanding the importance of reserves¹ and reserve forces² as one of the lessons identified from the Russia – Ukraine War regarding the human factor, at mid-2024 the Alliance started to revitalize their role and missions in being utilized in NATO-led operations. In this respect, it was created a ‘Tiger Team’ at the International Military Staff (IMS) level, under the lead of IMS Policy and Capabilities Division (IMS P&C), involving Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) from the Military Committee, the two Strategic Commands, the National Reserve Forces Committee (NRFC) and the

¹ A.N.: Reserves or reservists are “individuals who have undergone military training and can be called into active service for a set period of time in peace, crisis or conflict. Reservists may join with a background as an ex-regular, an ex-conscript or volunteer” (NATO Military Committee 2024, 2).

² A.N.: Reserve Forces are “formed units that are entirely or predominantly staffed by Reservists” (NATO Military Committee 2024, 2).

three Advocacy Reserve Organizations (ARO) - the Interallied Confederation of Reserve Officers (CIOR), the Interallied Confederation of Medical Reserve Officers (CIOMR), and the Interallied Confederation of Reserve Non-Commissioned Officers (CISOR).

The idea of reserves' revitalization incorporates also their reorientation to become a part of a more robust force structure with an exceptionally cost-effective balance of human potential, incorporating the whole-of-society approach for NATO and Allies' operations, missions and all type of military activities. This also applies for the Romanian Armed Forces, where the involvement of reservists and the development of reserve forces are in an incipient phase. The whole-of-society approach represents the vital link between the society and military, beneficial for changing the civilian perception of the military, a perception that has been eroding lately.

Therefore, the Romanian Armed Forces should take all necessary measures to catch up with the most evolved Allies in the reserve forces field, including the use of reservists' civilian expertise and their training to become real warriors. There should be no limitations or less efficiency between active forces standards and reserve forces preparedness, because, at the end of their training, reservists would augment/complete some active units to make them fully operational. One such efficient measure is represented by the Guide for Voluntary Reservists, elaborated by the Romanian Reserve Officers Association (ROU AORR).

As a result, this paper highlights what bright ideas bring out the new NATO policy on reserves and how they start to be implemented inside the Alliance. There are some limitations in doing so more effectively, because the responsibility and prerogative of establishing, developing and training those reserves/reserve forces are at each member state level. The scientific method which will be used is the evaluation of available database and information, followed by a multidimensional analysis of the importance and influence of the policy in changing the political and military mentality on utilizing reserves to conduct operations and strengthen the national resilience. In the third section of the paper, an example on how ROU AORR could contribute to reservists' preparedness is presented in a form of a quite new tool that can be used by the Romanian Armed Forces to develop such enabling operational resources.

1. NATO's New Policy on Reserves

The thorough analysis of the Russia – Ukraine War regarding its long duration, as well as the rapid changes of its conduct and the situation in the operating environment, provided the Allied military leaders with several identified lessons. One of them refers to the human factor and the use of human resources, including reserve forces.

By considering this lesson identified on the importance and the use of human resources in the war, the NATO Military Committee decided to revitalize the way in which reserves and reserve forces are involved in NATO-led operations in the near future. It was also important to revise all existing MC documents related to the framework policy on reserves (MC 0441/2 from 13 March 2012) and its linked organizations with advisory roles in NATO (MC 0392/1 from 27 July 2012 for NRFC and MC 0248/2 from 27 July 2012 for CIOR).

The entire work to review the above mentioned documents and establish a new Allied policy for reserves took almost half a year and involved SMEs and civil – military experts from almost all IMS divisions, the two Strategic Commands, NRFC, CIOR³ and its member associations. In this respect, the Association for Reserve Officers from Romania (AORR) was directly involved in the process by providing data and information regarding the mobilization process and the use of reservists in the Romanian Armed Forces in coordination with the Defense Staff.

The Aim of the new NATO policy on reserve, as it is mentioned in the MC 0441/3 FINAL from 11 October 2024, was to provide a collective vision on the future use of reserves/reserve forces (R/RF) for the Alliance's core tasks, operations, missions and activities with an enhanced efficiency

³ CIOR was the representative and advocate of the other two specialised Confederations of reservists agreed by NATO – the Interallied Confederation of Medical Reserve Officers (CIOMR) and the Interallied Confederation of Non-Commissioned Officers (CISOR).

and a declared focus on the collective defense⁴ (NATO Military Committee 2024, 2). In this respect, the NATO Secretary General, Mr. Mark Rutte, highlights the huge role played by the reserve forces as part of NATO’s defense and deterrence, considering the fact that they represent a vital pillar of the collective defense because they comprise over half of the military strength of the Allies’ wartime forces (NATO Press Release 2025 1).

At the same time, the Chair of the Military Committee, Admiral Cavo Dragone, mentions the important specialist roles of reserve forces in enhancing the national and collective resilience, because they play an important role in the whole spectrum of national and NATO’s defense structures (NATO Press Release 2025 2).

Another important aspect of the new Policy concerns NATO Vision on reserves, which implies suitably trained and qualified reserves that enhance Allies’ and the Alliance’s ability to deliver the three core tasks through contributing to the workforce requirements of a Multi-Domain enabled Alliance. This vision was influenced by the CIOR vision of the interaction between MC and entities dealing with reserve matters (see Figure no. 1) and reflects the ‘Whole-of-Society’ approach. According to this Vision, “reserves can act as an important resource to foster innovation, enhance partnerships, attract and retain specialized talent and improve decision-making. Allies and the Alliance may, with the increased utilization of reserves, be able to mitigate shortfalls and bridge strategic and qualitative requirements such as capability gaps, navigating normally lengthy development and procurement processes, allowing for faster adaptation and thus maintaining a competitive edge. In addition, Reserves contribute to a whole-of-society approach by strengthening the civilian – military links and enhancing societal resilience” (NATO Military Committee 2024, 4).

It is well-known and truly recognized that NATO does not have or control its own reserve forces. Therefore, in this domain the Military Committee relays on active military’s expertise as members of the new established NATO Committee on Reserves (NCR)⁵, which focuses on military policy and concepts. It also collaborates with CIOR, CIOMR and CISOR, known as Advocacy Reserve Organizations (ARO). The whole idea behind this collaborative team work includes advising the Military Committee as well as training and educating interallied reservists. In conjunction these entities cooperate to harmonize their respective programs and projects to further NATO’s mission of deterrence and defense.

⁴ The Policy is “reflective of and aligned with the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO Military Strategy and key concepts such as the Alliance Concept on Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC), and the Alliance Concept for Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)” (NATO Military Committee 2024, 3).

⁵ Former National Reserve Forces Committee (NRFC)

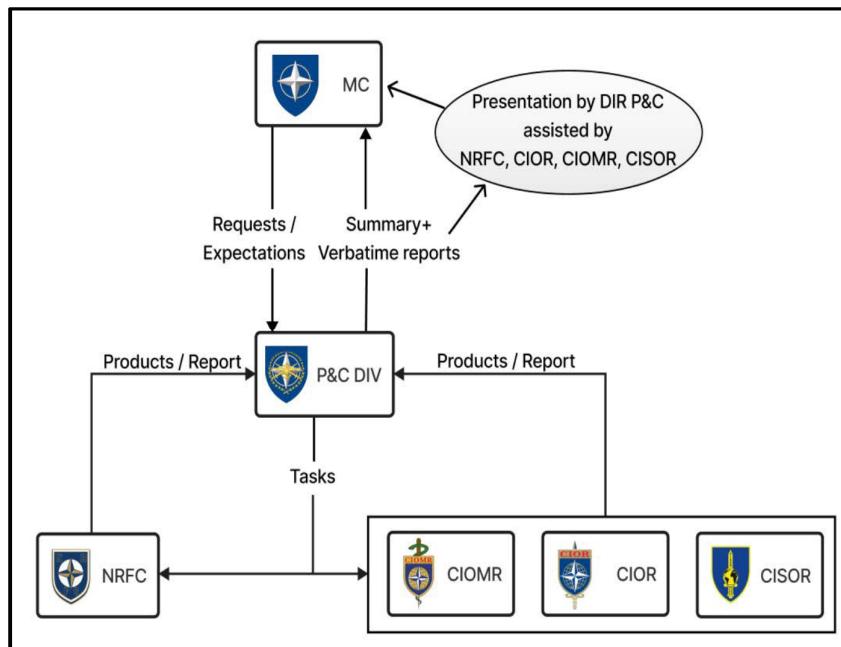


Figure no. 1: NATO Vision for Reserves (Luman 2024)

2. The Implementation of the Reserve Policy at the Alliance Level

As threats to global security evolved, so did the role of reserve forces in the Alliance. This is why the implementation of the new approved Policy is considered a major challenge for the Alliance and a ‘must immediately do’ thing, as soon as possible. In this respect, NATO and Allies already conducted some actions and planned additional activities in the near future to achieve the desired effects.

One important action was represented by the ‘2025 Plenary Meeting for Reserves’ that was conducted at the HQ NATO in Brussels, on 29 January 2025. This meeting was supported by a Science and Technology Organization’s activity called ‘Research Workshop on Reserves (STO HFM-390)’⁶, which was concluded also in Brussels, between 27-29 January 2025. Both events emphasized the importance of sharing best practices and adapting priorities to align with NATO’s evolving needs, particularly in areas such as Multi Domain Operations and Civil-Military engagement. With reservists comprising a significant portion of national forces in some NATO countries, the exchange of ideas and lessons learned becomes increasingly valuable, highlighting the crucial role of the Policy in fostering collaboration and innovation within the Alliance to implement its framework.

There are several important takeaways that emerged from the two combined events. The first one is about the idea that reservists combine a civilian career with a military function and therefore play a crucial role in building bridges between military and non-military personnel across the Alliance, at a time when NATO must adopt a wartime mindset, as it was recently mentioned by Mr. Mark Rutte (NATO Press Release 2025 1).

If in the past the reserves’ main role was to be available to fight as soon as there is the need to mobilize forces, making them an indispensable part of the Alliance’s security, the new Allied approach becomes more demanding, combining their essential role for ensuring NATO and Allies’ capability to deter and defend with the one of consolidating individual and collective resilience and the technological advantage. As per many historical examples (including COVID-19 and the Los Angeles wildfires), reservists demonstrate they are critical in aiding society in times of great needs

⁶ The Research Workshop on Reserve event with the subject “Reserve Forces: Challenges and Relevance to NATO and National Security” is part of a larger project of the NATO Science and Technology Organization (STO), which started on 1 September 2024 and should be finished towards the end of 2025 (NATO STO Team 2025).

and have a dual role of citizens and soldiers, acting as conduit between the military and the private sector (NATO Press Release 2025 2).

The organization, composition, mission, and training levels of reserve forces vary widely across the Alliance. However, the Allies' reserve forces have a lot of things in common. This commonality was highlighted by the Chair of the NATO Committee on Reserves (NCR), Brigadier General Charlotte Wetche, during the Plenary Meeting, when he mentioned two very important aspects of this commonality. The first one was about the important role they play in the whole spectrum of national and NATO defense structures, because during a crisis situation they would be required to take up positions and carry out tasks alongside regular forces. Therefore, reserves are no longer considered to be the forces of the last resort; rather, they are now recognized as indispensable. Another significant commonality most reserve forces throughout NATO share is the challenge to recruit and retain talent. “Further, the general change in the global security environment has sparked a renewed focus on reserve forces and how they can be governed” (ACT Team 2024).

The Plenary Meeting brought together four groups: NCR, CIOR, CIOMR and CISOR. The multifaceted plenary meeting included briefings, topical discussions, and syndicate work. A major focus of this year's meeting was NATO's new Reserves policy, which was adopted in November 2024. The new policy is aimed at cementing the promotion of Reserves in contribution to NATO's core tasks, operations, missions and activities.

At the same time, the Scientific Research Workshop on Reserves brought into attention another important aspect of future conflicts – the idea of NATO having enough forces to respond to the renewed threat of mass conventional warfighting.⁷ But NATO does not have enough troops to fight Russia and this has been a cruel truth since the end of the Second World War. This is the reason for which the Alliance plans to train NATO's new 300,000-troop, as part of its NFM, including the Allied Response Force (ARF), which rely also on reserve forces, as a key component of any NATO large scale response. This is quite true because there is evidence about an already participation of reserves with 30-40 percent at some NATO exercises and operations, which is in line with NATO's attempting to make its formations increasingly interoperable and multinational by integrating reserve capabilities (Dalzell and Cormarie 2024).

Not of a lesser importance is the attempt of CIOR to establish its Strategic Concept following the new NATO Policy on Reserve and what are the main responsibilities of the organization and nations in increasing the dual use of reserves and reserve forces and development of professional capabilities of Military-Civil nature that could be deployed in a military or civil context. With the intent to become a NATO-integrated partner, this document is to reflect the CIOR Vision 2028 and is under development.

3. Case Study – The Proposed Guide for Volunteer Reservists

Due to recent changes in the physiognomy of conflicts, there are multiple and complex factors that characterize it now, including new political-economic and strategic insecurity situations, new political and strategic goals, new objectives, forces, and specific means of action, a different conception and intensity of actions, a different attitude towards the adversary, different deployment spaces, a wide variety of dominant types of actions, as well as increasingly sophisticated and unexpected manifestations of violence and aggression (Brumaru și Ionita 2024, 30). For mitigating those challenges and understanding the importance of reserves and reserve forces as one of the lessons identified from the Russia–Ukraine War, NATO started to revitalize their role and missions within NATO-led operations in mid-2024 and succeed to propose robust reserves in accordance with its five principles⁸ that set out their benefits in terms of military capabilities and civilian skillset in a 'Whole-of-Society' approach.

⁷ The renewed idea of NATO facing mass conventional warfighting was sustained by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, where reserve forces were used on large scale by the two belligerents, as well as the rapid mass mobilization of the Israeli reserve forces after 10 October 2023.

⁸ According to the new NATO Policy on Reserve, nations are encouraged to build and maintain national reserve systems based on five principles: augment deterrence and defense; enhance interoperability; enable strategic depth; support crisis response; and enhance societal resilience and Alliance cohesion (NATO Military Committee 2024, 7).

The Romanian Armed Forces are in the early stages of integrating reservists into national defense strategies. The whole-of-society approach is key to bridging the gap between civilians and the military, improving the public perception of the Armed Forces, and ensuring the operational readiness of reservists. One of the effective measures in this regard is the '*Guide for Voluntary Reservists*', developed by the Association of Reserve Officers from Romania (AORR) with the aim to enhance the preparedness and efficiency of reserve forces (Brumaru și Ionita 2024).

In the current geopolitical context, being characterized by rapid and unpredictable dynamics, strengthening reserve forces becomes a strategic necessity and remains a national responsibility and prerogative. In this regard, the '*Voluntary Reservist's Guide*' serves as an essential tool for those who wish to actively contribute to national defense. Developed by the Romanian Reserve Officers Association (ROU AORR), as part of CIOR, this guide reflects contemporary requirements for training and integrating voluntary reservists, in accordance with MC 0441/3 and the Defense Staff's regulations *SMAp 76/2019* and *SMAp 40/2023*.

The training of voluntary reservists is a fundamental element of societal resilience and national security and it is well established by the new NATO Policy on Reserves. According to recent studies, the effective integration of civilians into defense structures significantly enhances a nation's responsiveness to emerging threats (Smith 2020). In this sense, the guide is structured into two fundamental modules (see Figure no. 2):

- *Module 1: Basic Military Knowledge* – provides information on the organization of armed forces, military discipline, rights and obligations, psychological and physical training, survival techniques, and the use of essential equipment.
- *Module 2: Training and Conduct of Military Actions* – focuses on the application of acquired knowledge, including weaponry, military tactics, hybrid warfare, and operational strategies.

The guide is designed to allow the progressive accumulation of knowledge and optimize centralized training time. On the first day of the 15-day training period, reservists will take theoretical knowledge verification tests, thus facilitating an objective assessment of progress (Jones 2018).

Additionally, the guide contains self-assessment questionnaires designed to support the continuous development of individual competencies.



Figure no. 2: The Voluntary Reservists' Guide (ROU AORR 2024)

The structure of this very practical military guide comprises the followings:

1. *Module 1: Basic Military Knowledge*:

- Organization of the Romanian Armed Forces and NATO;
- Military discipline rules;
- Psychological and physical preparedness;
- Survival and orientation techniques;

- First aid and CBRN protection elements;
- Mobile applications and useful resources.

2. *Module 2: Training and Conduct of Military Actions:*

- Familiarization with weaponry and equipment;
- Operational strategies and tactical scenarios;
- Defense against drones and cyber threats;
- Application of hybrid warfare concepts;
- Standardized document models and procedures.

In order to facilitate the learning and training process, the Guide will be available in both printed and online formats, on a dedicated platform for voluntary reservists. Flexible access to training materials allows for the deepening of knowledge outside the official training period (Brown 2017). At the end of the Guide, reservists will have the opportunity to complete a satisfaction and improvement questionnaire, thus contributing to the continuous enhancement of the content.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that all issues related to reserves are a national responsibility and prerogative, the revitalization of reserves and reserve forces is vital for the Alliance’s deterrence and defense to face all new threats and risks of the 21st Century and beyond 360-degrees. Therefore, its new policy on reserves, approved in October 2024, is a reflection of all Allied strategic documents elaborated after 2022 and represents a major tool in ensuring the implementation of the new elaborated and agreed DDA Family of Plans (FoP), as well as the new NATO Force Model (NFM). In this idea, the reserves can help mitigating the potential lack of suitable trained and readily available military workforce for the full range of NATO operations, missions and activities.

In the last years, the significance of reservists within Allied Armed Forces started to increase considerably. They not only help bridge workforce gaps, but also foster stronger connections between civil society and the military. Additionally, they bring invaluable expertise in niche areas, such as Information Technology, Cyber, Logistics, Human Resources, Finance, and Medical, in order to enhance military capabilities.

Unfortunately, there are some difficult limitations in the ‘Whole-of-Society’ approach for the Alliance’s deterrence and defense task, as well as for many Allies’ ‘Whole Force’ model of their Armed Forces (an integrated blend of active, including conscripts, reserve, defense civilian and contracted personnel). These limitations refer to the demographic crisis and the falling unemployment rates in the Western world (especially in Europe and the US) that hinder the recruitment and retaining process and make it more difficult, both for active duty and reserves. Both limitations are amplified by the shrinking pool of recruits and volunteers who meet the military recruitment standards because of fitness, mental illness, or past criminal activity. The difficulty of hitting recruiting number of Armed Forces, including reservists, could be transformed into a real vulnerability in the near future.

At present, the Romanian Armed Forces’ reserve forces face several challenges, including consistent decline, political and military neglect, and an undersized structure compared to other NATO members. The difficulty in leveraging the reserve force for defense, combined with the inefficient use of volunteer participation, poses a risk to internal security and national defense objectives. Urgent measures are needed to revitalize and enhance these reserve forces to ensure sustainable military capabilities. The implementation of structured guides, such as the ‘Guide for Voluntary Reservists’, represents an essential step toward addressing these issues and fostering a robust reserve force. Another AORR project is to develop a platform to support the recruitment, training and preparedness process of the Minister of National Defense for volunteer reservists.

The two above mentioned projects represent the deep implication of ROU AORR to support the Romanian Armed Forces in implementing the new NATO Policy on Reserve, especially by preparing the Voluntary Reserve Corps to understand and be used to actively participate in the national and collective defense. Their increasing role as both warriors and supporters of the societal

resilience should be well introduced in the future military strategies and doctrines in order to bring to bear the whole-of-society approach for national defense.

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