



WAPES European Regional Conference

## Defending the Future



*Effective workforce development to deliver better recruitment, retention, and reintegration outcomes  
for the defence and security services*

Riga, October 13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> 2025

Hosted by

**The State Employment Agency of Latvia (NVA)**



State  
Employment Agency  
Republic of Latvia

## Disclaimer

This publication was produced jointly by the World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES) and the State Employment Agency of Latvia (NVA) following the WAPES European Regional Conference held in Riga, 13–15 October 2025.

The information, analyses, and opinions presented herein reflect the contributions of the conference speakers and participants. They do not necessarily represent the official views of WAPES, NVA, or any participating institution.



WAPES European Regional Conference Defending the Future - Effective workforce development to deliver better recruitment, retention, and reintegration outcomes for the defence and security services © 2025 by World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES) and State Employment Agency of Latvia (NVA) is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

## A. Introduction

### A Brief Overview

From October 14 to 15, 2025, the WAPES European Regional Conference took place in Riga, Latvia. It was hosted by the State Employment Agency of Latvia (NVA) and took place in the premises of the Latvian National Library. The event gathered over 60 experts from across Europe, including representatives from public employment services (PES), military forces, non-governmental organizations, private companies, and retired military personnel, to address the crucial issue of workforce integration for defence- and public security-related personnel.

The participants of the conference were welcomed by the Latvian Minister of Welfare, Mr Reinis Uzuniņš, who thereby highlighted the importance that Latvia places on international cooperation between PES, as well as on the conference itself, whose theme is directly related to today's challenges for regional security.

During three plenary discussions, as well as interactive workshops, conference participants addressed the three main components of military and security personnel employment and the role of PES in these areas: recruitment, retention, and reintegration. The main topics of the panel discussions included forecasting and closing defence skills gaps; strategic collaboration between PES and the defence and security sector; strategic, skills-based recruitment; and the reintegration and reskilling of former defence and security related personnel.

### Why Focus on Defence and Security Collaboration?

Behind the news headlines around increasing European defence capacity lies the very practical challenge of workforce development – how to recruit, develop and re-integrate armed forces and security personnel. Some of these challenges are common to other workforce sectors including demographic and technological change and growing recruitment and retention difficulties. Many others, however, are more specific to the world of defence and security including complex hiring procedures, demanding work conditions, and the post-career need to adapt back into civilian work and community life.

To address these workforce development challenges successfully, PES are increasingly developing more holistic, user-centric measures that we see emerging for other labour market groups which bring together capacity that links skills, employability, and health/wellness to provide a more holistic, tailored service offer.

This support can include measures like widening marketing channels, adopting innovative recruitment practices, enhancing workforce preparedness, aligning skills development with security sector-specific needs, and supporting labour market reintegration for service personnel, including those recovering from physical and mental health conditions.

The Conference is structured around **three** core themes that reflect the life cycle of workforce engagement within the defence and security sectors. These pillars will guide the agenda and are embedded across all sessions:

#### 1. Recruitment

Focuses on attracting new talent into the defence and security sectors. What's the best way to identify potential candidates, facilitate outreach, support digital and inclusive recruitment strategies, and help fill critical skill gaps? Do PES and their partners need to nurture specialist work coaches or

use those with ‘lived experience’ of the armed forces to better understand the sector’s wider workforce needs?

## 2. Retention

Personnel turnover is not unique to the security services - on average firms can expect an annual churn of about 20%. How can workforce development services help improve retention by facilitating dual-track training, personal development pathways, and helping spouses find appropriate work?

## 3. Reintegration

In some countries veterans are nearly twice as likely to face unemployment than their civilian counterparts and can take over a year to fully adjust to civilian work life. What does the evidence show works best to support successful transitions? What lessons can be learned from targeted career services, tailored employer outreach, skills validation, integrated mental health support and help for the wider family?

Taken together, these pillars will help us refresh our thinking about, on the one hand, how we can improve the support we offer the defence and security services as **employers** and, on the other, how we can best tailor our service offer to **‘workers’** as they begin their journeys into the defence and security sectors and subsequently back into civilian work and their communities. What tools do we already have, what tools do we need to adapt, and what new tools do we need to co-design?

## B. Three Pillars of Collaboration

Analysing the discussions and presentations of the conference participants, it is possible to briefly outline the key challenges and emerging trends in the areas of recruitment, retention of military and defence-related personnel, as well as support for their reintegration into the labour market after completing service.

### Recruitment – Attracting and Preparing the Right Talent

The rising global focus on defence, driven by geopolitical tensions and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’s 5% GDP spending goal by 2030, is reshaping labour markets across Europe. Defence activities are increasingly concentrated in urban “defence hubs,” where demand for high-skilled workers in engineering, aviation, IT, logistics, and security continues to grow. Yet, the parallel rise in medium- and low-skilled roles highlights the need for more inclusive workforce planning. PES play a crucial role in this transformation — analysing labour market data, identifying skill gaps, and designing targeted training and transition programmes to ensure that defence investments translate into sustainable employment and balanced regional development.

Examples from across Europe illustrate the diverse approaches to strategic recruitment. In Slovenia, the PES cooperates with the national police to promote careers in law enforcement, addressing demographic decline and skill mismatches through motivational campaigns and community outreach. Similarly, in Latvia, PES promote purpose-driven defence careers by emphasizing transferable skills, modern workplaces, and clear career pathways while combating stereotypes about military work. In Germany, the Federal Employment Agency strengthens links between civilian and military labour markets through cooperation with the Armed Forces — expanding recruitment, organizing career events, and ensuring that both civilian and military sectors have access to qualified talent. Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate how PES can bridge societal needs and workforce opportunities, securing a sustainable talent pipeline for national defence and security.

## **Retention – Keeping Skills and Motivation Strong**

Retention in the defence sector has become a critical global challenge as competition intensifies for scarce digital and technical skills essential for cyber operations, Artificial Intelligence (AI), drone systems, and advanced targeting. High attrition rates — driven by unmet expectations, work–life imbalance, limited career development, and low morale — weaken defence readiness and productivity. Innovative responses, such as Singapore’s Ministry of Defence digital workforce portal developed by Accenture, show how user-centric platforms and data-driven career management can enhance engagement, family inclusion, and long-term retention.

Across Europe, PES and defence institutions are beginning to address these challenges through skills-based recruitment and workforce development. For instance, the German Federal Employment Agency (FEA)’s cooperation with the German Armed Forces supports career guidance, job matching, and the integration of former military personnel, contributing not only to recruitment but also to retention by ensuring smoother career transitions and continued professional growth. Retention also depends on modern learning systems, modular upskilling, and adaptive career frameworks that recognize diverse skill levels — from high-tech specialists to essential support roles such as logistics, maintenance, and food services. By aligning human resource strategies with national security goals, governments and PES can maintain motivation, competence, and stability across all levels of the defence workforce.

## **Reintegration – From Service to Civilian Life**

Reintegration represents the final and most socially complex phase of the defence employment cycle — supporting veterans and transitioning personnel as they re-enter civilian life. The Swiss Ingeus model provides an inspiring example: through trauma-informed, holistic coaching and peer-led training, displaced Ukrainians and veterans receive mental health support, skill recognition, and employment guidance. PES can adopt similar “whole person” approaches, combining employment assistance with psychological and social integration measures to improve long-term outcomes.

Veterans bring valuable skills — leadership, teamwork, adaptability, and resilience — yet often face stigma, skill translation barriers, and uncertainty in civilian workplaces. Employers that implement dedicated veteran recruitment and mentorship programmes report stronger retention, faster promotions, and improved team cohesion. To support successful reintegration, PES are encouraged to launch pre-retirement programmes, offer early career counselling and digital training, organize job fairs, and provide post-service mental health and mentorship support.

The United States offers a model of coordinated reintegration through federal initiatives such as Transition Assistance Program (TAP), Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG), Local Veterans’ Employment Representative (LVER), and Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program (DVOPS), which combine structured transition support with corporate inclusion strategies. These examples underline the importance of collaboration among ministries, employers, and funding bodies such as the European Social Fund (ESF+). Effective reintegration is not only about employment — it’s about restoring dignity, stability, and purpose, while ensuring that the valuable experience of veterans continues to strengthen society and the economy.

## C. Key Takeaways

### Recruitment:

- Defence expansion creates growing demand for both high-skilled and essential support roles.
- PES are critical in analysing labour markets, identifying skill gaps, and designing training to align with defence needs.
- National examples (Slovenia, Latvia, Germany) show that PES–Defence cooperation strengthens recruitment pipelines.
- Inclusive workforce planning ensures balanced regional development and social resilience.
- Public trust and community outreach are key to attracting diverse talent into defence and security careers.
- Implementing skills-based recruitment to modernise recruitment strategies, attract more talent and prevent shift-shock should be accompanied by an adjustment in organisational culture.

### Retention:

- Retaining digital and technical talent is now a core strategic challenge for defence readiness.
- User-centric digital tools and modular learning systems improve engagement, family inclusion, and career growth.
- PES partnerships with defence institutions (e.g., the German Federal Employment Agency) support long-term retention through continued guidance and re-skilling.
- Retention strategies must address all levels of the workforce — from engineers and IT experts to logistics and support staff.
- Sustained motivation and competence require aligning Human Resources (HR) systems with national defence and resilience goals.

### Reintegration

- Reintegration of veterans and displaced persons requires holistic, trauma-informed, and skill-based approaches.
- PES can play a pivotal role through early transition planning, mental health support, and targeted job matching.
- Employers benefit from veteran-inclusive practices — boosting retention, leadership diversity, and workplace cohesion.
- International models (Switzerland, United States) demonstrate the impact of coordinated public–private efforts.
- Reintegration strengthens both society and the economy when linked to EU-level cooperation and funding (e.g., ESF+).

## D. Looking Ahead

The discussions in Riga confirmed that defending the future is, above all, about investing in people. Public Employment Services are not only intermediaries between jobseekers and employers; they are essential actors in building inclusive, adaptable, and resilient labour markets.

Throughout the conference, one message stood out clearly: the challenges of digitalisation, demographic shifts, and security transitions can only be addressed through shared solutions. Collaboration, competence, and confidence will therefore remain the guiding principles of WAPES's work.

- Collaboration — by strengthening bridges between employment services, education and training systems, and the defence and security sectors.
- Competence — by developing and recognising the skills that enable individuals to contribute to changing labour markets.
- Confidence — by reinforcing trust in public services and ensuring that people feel supported through transition.

As a network built by and for its members, WAPES will continue to promote learning and exchange beyond Riga. By creating spaces for dialogue and cooperation, WAPES enables its members to transform ideas into practical action — ensuring that our shared commitment to inclusion, innovation, and workforce resilience continues to grow across Europe and beyond.

## E. Quotes

“In today’s global world, security issues are increasingly interconnected with challenges such as artificial intelligence, hybrid risks, and cybersecurity. Therefore, it is crucial that employment policies and defence and security strategies operate in close coordination. This alignment is essential for building a secure and resilient society while also preparing qualified professionals for the defence and security sector.” (Reinis Uzulnieks, Minister of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia)

“European employment services are building a bridge between new geopolitical realities and people’s potential. Our role is fundamental: national security is ensured by people. Employment, security, and loyalty are closely interconnected concepts. A person who feels safe in their country, has a job, social support, and opportunities for development forms the foundation of a strong state.” (Evita Simsons, Director General of the State Employment Agency of the Republic of Latvia)

“Across Europe, defence and security are again at the forefront of public debate. Yet behind every discussion on budgets or capacity stand people—individuals who serve, their families, and the communities that support them. Their journeys—whether entering service, sustaining long careers, or reintegrating afterwards—are at the heart of our work.” (Greta Metka Barbo Škerbinc, President of WAPES, Director General of the Employment Service of the Republic of Slovenia)

## F. Visual Annex



Source: WAPES

### About the Hosts

The event was hosted by the State Employment Agency of Latvia (NVA) in cooperation with WAPES, supported by the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of Defence of Latvia. Conference sessions took place at the National Library of Latvia, with social events showcasing Riga's cultural heritage.