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The Image of the Democratic Soldier: Results and Experiences of the Field Research

The Hungarian Case

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Research Project „The Image of the Democratic Soldier: Tensions Between the
Organisation of Armed Forces and the Principles of Democracy in European
Comparison“

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1. Introduction: As Hungarian Soldiers See It...

First and foremost, it has to be noted that the organization of the Hungarian Defense is not supportive at all to any kind of scientific research conducted by civilians, especially not by ‘outsiders’, e.g. by people, who do not belong to the ranks of the armed forces, or are not employed – directly or indirectly – by the MoD. Though we understand the basic security-related necessities behind such an attitude, we still cannot avoid mentioning that regardless of the confirmed scientific background of the research, and of the supportive declarations provided by the PRIF, we still met unbreakable walls every time, when we tried to use the official way during our research. Either we got direct refusal, or the approached officials emphasized the complexity of the licensing process, and finally we got no direct permissions. Therefore, most of the interviews analyzed here were conducted in a rather informal way, based on personal contacts and relationships. The only exception was Colonel R., with the help of whom we could interview numerous first and second year cadets on a single occasion – therefore, hereby we would like to express our gratitude to him.

1.1. About the sample

Finally 26 interviews of the altogether 31 conducted produced valuable results;¹ therefore, the paper below is based on the answers given in these. Concerning the age distribution, the youngest person interviewed was 19, while the oldest one was 58, according to the following distribution:

Under 20	7
20-30	7
30-40	5
40-50	3
50 -	4

The sample is rather unbalanced from the gender perspective, which requires a few comments. The structure of the personnel of the HDF reflects a strong gender impartiality: in 2009 approximately 20% of the HDF staff are women, which is the highest rate among the NATO member countries.² Interestingly enough, in recent years

¹ The other five subjects answered only a very few questions in the questionnaire, and/or gave not serious answers (the cadets), thus their results had to be left out.

² *ZMNE a magyar honvédelem napja*. 25th May 2009. Available: http://www.hm.gov.hu/hirek/hazai_hirek/zmne_honvedelem_napja Last accessed: 29th June 2009.

the rate of females has significantly increased: in 2005 it was only 17%. (There were exactly 4000 females of the altogether 23290 staff, equal to 17,1%). Unfortunately we could not reproduce this rate during the research: we could interview only 3 females, which is slightly less than 10%, if compared to the originally conducted 31 interviews.

We intended to produce a balanced distribution of ranks; however, this could be achieved only with moderate success, due to the above mentioned circumstances. Thus the final rank distribution of the interviews is as follows:

Cadets	10
Privates	0
NCOs	4
Officers (from Lieutenant to Captain)	9
Field officers (from Major to Colonel)	3
Generals	0

By examining the sample according to the time they have spent in military service, the distribution was the following

0 -4	11 ³
5-10	5
10-25	7
25+	3

Concerning service status, another weakness of the sample is that we could not interview soldiers serving on contract at all. This problem was more or less foreseeable, taking into account the negative attitude of the official structures towards the whole research. Most contracted soldiers serve in countryside bases, to which we could not get official access. Moreover, the 'service chain' proved to be rather strong in their cases: even though we had unofficial chat with a few of them, they all refused to give complete and systematic answers to our questions, referring to the need to get permission from their superiors – a permission which could not be officially obtained. Finally we decided not to make use of the fragmented answers they gave. Thus the final service status distribution of the sample is as follows:

³ In addition to the ten cadets, one of the professional officer respondents became an officer only last year, as he had been employed earlier in a civilian status.

Cadets	10
Contracted	0
Professional	14
Retired	2

Regarding the unit distribution, we could interview mostly soldiers serving either in the central bodies of the Hungarian Defense Forces, or in bases in the area of Budapest, as getting access to bases in the countryside would require official permission. All in all, the unit distribution of the respondents was the following:

Military education institution	12
Central MoD administration	3
Background institutions of the MoD	3
Field units	8

1.2. Comments on methodology

In accordance with the regulations of the PRIF ‘Democratic Soldier’ research project, we used questionnaires for our interviews, which were either filled in by the subjects, or we conducted an oral interview going along the line of the questionnaire. If those who filled in the questionnaire in writing, gave mostly useless answers⁴, their papers were not used in the evaluation process. On the other hand, if a subject wrote that he/she did not want to answer a given question, such answers, of course, were included/taken into consideration. Due to the above described nature of the research, all interviews were conducted anonymously, as we were bound by the promise that none of our interview subjects could later be identified. As a direct consequence of the limited size of the sample, and of the fact that not all questionnaires were filled in completely (some questions were not applicable to the cases of some respondents, for example the ones about mission experience to cadets), we put emphasis on the content-oriented analysis of the answers instead of a statistics-based approach. Therefore we did not ask the respondents to rank their answers, nor did we put any limit on the number of answers, virtues named, etc. In order to bridge language barriers, we assembled a Hungarian questionnaire according to the outline provided by PRIF. The English translation of it is attached in the Appendix.

⁴ e.g. they tried to be funny instead of answering, etc.

2. Personal motivations, self-perception, ideals

The answers given to the question of personal motivations produced the most visible diversity of answers, especially between the cadets and the experienced officers. With regard to the main personal goals, the most often mentioned objective of the cadets⁵ was to achieve high ranking (8 of 10). In the second place they wanted to get a stable job and/or a good salary (7 of 10), while in the third the most often mentioned goal was to go on missions. The answers given by the older and higher-ranking soldiers were more focused on abstract values, and showed greater diversity. The most often mentioned (12 of 16) term was ‘to contribute to the defense of the homeland’, or variations of it. It is interesting to note that only very few (2 of 10) cadets gave similarly abstract answers; they seemingly focused on saying concrete things.

2.2. The ideal soldier and commander

With regard to the most important virtues of the good soldier, certain virtues were mentioned both by the cadets and the officers: bravery, honesty, loyalty, patriotism, discipline and comradeship. Many cadets (6 of 10) named good physical condition as well, while from the officers only a few (3 of 16) felt it important to mention it. On the other hand, no cadets referred to more abstract virtues, which many officers mentioned: creativity, ability to decide autonomously, team player, organizational and leadership skills. This might lead us to the conclusion that these latter virtues (or recognizing their necessity) are not really taught, but are rather internally developed during the service years. Concerning possible gender differences in the personal values, all 26 respondents thought that the same values apply to male and female soldiers.⁶

When asked about the virtues of the good military leader, basically the same answers were given regarding the personal characteristics (bravery, loyalty) together with the responsibility for the subordinates (mentioned by 22 of 26!), the ability to act independently (15 of 26) and having a sober mind (12 of 26). Seemingly by far the most important virtue of a good commander is his/her readiness to care and be responsible for his/her subordinates – this judgment is equally shared by cadets and officers.

2.3. Higher values

As to the questions on military ethos, most respondents gave answers at least partially overlapping with the first question on personal values. The virtues patriotism, bravery and discipline were mentioned by the decisive majority of them (23 of 26) While only five

⁵ With a larger sample it would have been interesting trying to differentiate between cadets in various years of their studies.

⁶ The rather gender-neutral attitude inside the HDF is confirmed by a recent sociological research as well. For more information, see: KARÁCSONY Veronika: *Nők a hadseregben*. In: ‘Nemzet és Biztonság.’ April 2009. pp. 70-79.

cadets mentioned the respect of military traditions, this was named by most of the officers (11 of 16). Two field officers mentioned the readiness for lifelong learning.

About the Hungarian military traditions, the picture was rather diverse. Clearly patriotism was pointed out by the most (15 of 26). Some cadets named concrete celebrations and military holidays, others pointed out bravery and the readiness to fight till the last drop of blood even in defeat. A few cadets (3) and more officers (7) mentioned the ability to be tricky and the deception of the enemy as part of the Hungarian military traditions. Some respondents (6) mentioned only the 'respect of traditions', without giving further specifications. One field officer gave a long, quite detailed answer; pointing out that the Hungarian military traditions are integral parts of the European, and mainly of the Prussian ones, which, however, due to the NATO integration of the country, are increasingly overwritten by the Anglo-Saxon traditions.

Concerning the higher values represented, most cadets (7) and three officers answered that they did not represent any higher values. The others pointed out various values, both political and human ones. From the first group, the protection of the homeland and patriotism were mentioned by the most (6), the contribution to NATO came out second (5), and the protection of the Western society model (5). From the human values, comradeship was mentioned by the most (8).

3. The image of the soldier in the society

A strong majority of the respondents (23 of 26) agreed that currently there is no public debate going on in the Hungarian society either on the role of the armed forces in general, or on the 'ideal soldier.' Though most answers were rather short, one of the interviewed field officers gave a longer explanation, and argued that the civil or civic society in general is ignorant as to the army as a whole. With the suspension of the conscript service⁷, the army has disappeared from the everyday life of the civilians. Besides, there is no territorial or military threat to Hungary, thus soldiers and the armed forces appear on the agenda only when something extraordinary happens: natural disasters, military parade, or when Hungarian soldiers are attacked in a mission, etc. However, these news practically never last long.

The reasons of the lack of such a public debate were revealed in the answers given to the second question. Almost all (25 of 26) respondents stated that the overall image of the soldier in the eyes of the society has improved, mostly due to the professionalization of the army. Many answers also noted that since there has been no conscript service, the overall awareness about the armed forces and the 'public visibility' of the soldiers has decreased. Interestingly enough, only one respondent pointed out that the general tasks of the armed forces have changed with the democratic transition: instead of a party-

⁷ Though many speak about the abolition of the conscript service, the relevant law declares the conscript service to be suspended only, though for an indefinite amount of time.

controlled, subordinated, Communist army now Hungary has a professional, volunteer armed force serving the national interests of Hungary.

A bit contrary to the second question, the answers given about the existing stereotypes were rather negative. Many pointed out that civilians think soldiers do nothing in their daily life, and earn good money, especially when being on missions. Four respondents mentioned concrete negative stereotypes about the soldiers: being alcoholic (3), being aggressive (3), having only muscles in their heads (2). From the answers of almost all cadets (9 of 10) one can draw the conclusion with a rather high probability that they experienced a lack of understanding when they chose the military profession.

From the answers given to the second and the third questions, one might reach the conclusion that although the direct influence of the conscript service does not play a role any more, indirectly it still affects public attitude toward the army; thus one could summarize it as a kind of 'negative ignorance.' However, one has to remember that these are the results of a public survey conducted with a rather small sample, and, what is more important, among soldiers. The official public opinion polls show a definitely higher support and level of trust from the society toward the army – when civilians are interviewed.⁸ From the 'inside', the soldiers seem to have a rather negative opinion on what the 'outside' society thinks about them.

4. Democratic norms in the armed forces

Concerning the democratic norms in the armed forces, almost all respondents gave rather official-like answers. Thus besides analyzing their statements, it is also interesting to keep in mind what they did not say openly. About the norms of conflict settlement within in the armed forces, more or less every respondents agreed (though with individually different emphases) that first it is better to try to solve the interpersonal conflicts among the affected individuals, and the 'service way' should be used only, if personal solutions do not produce satisfactory results. Some cadets (4 of 10) mentioned that during their early trainings, they were not aware at all about their options and choices, not to mention the possibility to use the service way. However, all four emphasized that they never really needed it, all conflicts could either be solved, or they 'solved themselves.' One officer pointed out that the existence of the service way provides certain – though low - level of protection as well, if the situation becomes really dire. This, in his opinion, is much better than the treatment of employees in some multinational companies.

With regard to the limitations on their personal rights and freedoms, no one raised any concerns, and the decisive majority (22 of 26) stated openly that they took up service voluntarily, they were aware of these limitations and they accepted them. Only one field officer noted how much things depend on the individual commanders and individual

⁸ For example, see the survey results in: Dr. FAPÁL, László et al. (eds.): *A honvédelem négy éve 2002-2006*. Bp, 2006, HM Zrínyi Kommunikációs Szolgáltató Kht. pp. 220-222.

subordinates. As commanders might misuse their power, subordinates might also be able to misuse their democratic rights in certain situations. He stressed that each and every soldier is not only to learn, but also to understand and internalize the fundamental legal norms and limitations of the service.

The statement '*A soldier is primarily to serve his homeland, and should not care about politics.*' generated rather diverse answers. Interestingly enough, all cadets agreed with it, while the elder, more experienced officers and field officers gave more detailed answers. Some pointed out that the statement can be agreed only in the framework of a 'real democracy' (As he did not specify the meaning of it, we probably might perceive his answer as a silent critique to the current political situation in Hungary.). Others said that the soldier has to be informed about politics and the political situation of his homeland, though direct interference or engagement is to be avoided. During the oral interviews, most respondents (21 of 26) expressed their despair over the deep political divisions 'poisoning everyday life' in Hungary. One field officer criticized the implementation of the – otherwise good and exact – legal norms, and felt it important to stress that party politics is to be avoided in defense-related decision-making. He did not give any further information on that.

On the role of civilian subjects, the answers were again rather different. Cadets gave mostly supportive answers, simply due to the fact that these were their first real courses on the actual political system and way of operation of Hungary as a state, and they enjoyed getting the knowledge. On whether this knowledge will be applicable during their future career, they could give, of course, only general answers, like 'of course', 'I hope', 'obviously', etc. Older, more experienced, higher ranking soldiers were also supportive of the civilian subjects, but they gave more abstract, deeper answers, which could be divided into two main groups. The first argument for having civilian subjects was that they help to integrate the soldier (one officer used the term: 'citizen in uniform') in the society. The other reason was that soldiers are to know and to be aware of why they do or do not do certain things – and civilian subjects are inevitable in obtaining/acquiring? this knowledge.

5. Missions

From the altogether 26 respondents, the question on actual mission participation was applicable only in the case of 15, as 10 of the rest were still cadets, while one person has just freshly signed up for officer, as earlier he was employed as a civilian. From the 15 soldiers 7 had served abroad, six of them in international crisis management missions, while one had a military diplomatic position. Three of these six soldiers had participated in more than one mission. Second time they all held higher positions than during their first assignment.

5.1. Importance of the missions

When judging the mission participation of the HDF in general, all respondents considered it a rather successful story. However, two of the higher ranking interview subjects wrote that the missions consume too much resources of the defense budget, and result in the delay of domestic developments, equipment procurement, etc.

In the evaluation of the individual missions, in which the HDF is actually participating, the ones conducted in the Balkans met overall and complete support. All respondents, who mentioned them, acknowledged their necessity. Even cadets pointed out the importance of the missions in the Balkans, due to the geographical proximity of Hungary, the Hungarian business interests there, etc. The mission formerly conducted in Iraq⁹ was considered the opposite way: it was mentioned by six of the respondents, all in a negative, rejecting way.

Most of the interviewed soldiers avoided answering the question on the ‘unnecessary’ missions, but the Cyprus and the Sinai-peninsula operations were concretely mentioned by four of them, as being either ‘lesser important’, or ‘kind of holiday-resorts.’ One respondent voiced his concerns about the possibility of increasing the Hungarian participation in the missions in Africa. The presence of the HDF in Afghanistan was mentioned in a set of different ways. Six respondents expressed their concerns about the necessity of being there, while another eleven referred to the overall international security context, which makes the Afghanistan mission important for Hungarian national security as well. Ten of these eleven mentioned the NATO commitments of Hungary as part of the reasons. Taking a look at the age distribution of the respondents, one can state that the younger and/or the lower ranking a soldier is, the less he/she seems to understand the wider international security context, therefore, the less supportive he/she is of the Afghanistan mission. Interestingly enough, the fact that from 2009 Hungary is sending there fighting troops as well (first time in the post-transition history of Hungary!) was not reflected in the answers at all.

Regarding the question of improvements, seventeen (!) respondents pointed out the necessity of improving the technical equipment of the soldiers, emphasizing the need for more modern personal protection equipment in the first place. About whether the norms of civilian control and democratic norms are applicable in the field, the six respondents, who had served in international crisis management missions, gave rather negative answers. They pointed out that the norms and laws taught and learnt in higher education are rather far from the reality in the field. Moreover, in operational zones, where military public administration is introduced, such norms are applicable only on the highest levels of the military and political leadership. Another respondent answered that during missions the soldiers are to fulfill not only the general standards of democratic norms and civilian control, but are also to meet the expectations of the other, usually larger, partner countries in the given mission. Concerning the specific trainings received before the

⁹ In 2003-2004 Hungary participated in the Operation ‘Iraqi Freedom’ with a logistical battalion of approximately 300 personnel.

missions, three of them pointed out, how useful the lectures of the CIMIC personnel proved to be in the field, while others gave rather evasive answers.

5.2. Attitude toward the political leadership

The picture is surprisingly dark concerning the overall attitude and understanding of the politicians. Not a single positive answer was given, not even a partially positive one. Even if we do not take into account the rather emotional comments given by the cadets, the elder, higher ranking soldiers had a deeply negative, sometimes even desperate opinion. Generally speaking, politicians were seen lacking even the slightest understanding of the armed forces, not to mention experience or concrete practical knowledge.

With some extrapolation, we could say that almost all interviewed soldiers missed the military professionalism in the political decision-making processes, accused politicians of being ‘amateurs’, etc. In other words, it seems soldiers would prefer a higher involvement of either active or former soldiers in the political decision-making. Such an attitude also implies that in the soldiers’ opinion, the graduate and post-graduate training and education programmes for civilians did not have any impact on the highest levels of political decision-making, though factually many graduates of these programs work in the MoD, or in its background institutions.

One respondent pointed out that not a single member of the Committee on National Defense and Policing of the Parliament has any kind of education connected to security or military policy. By checking the CVs of the members of the committee, it turns out that the assessment is factually wrong, but not in its main content. One member of the committee is a former minister of defense, and had a rank of a colonel earlier. Another member has a Ph.D. in military science, a third attended a military secondary school, and a fourth person was¹⁰ actually a post-graduate student of defense administration at the ZMNDU.¹¹ However, according to their CVs, none of the rest thirteen members have any military-related professional experience, if we do not count the conscript service, and that a few of them had been members in the Committees on National Defense under the previous governments.

However, it is interesting to note that all three field officer respondents gave a rather differentiated evaluation. They pointed out that civilian politicians generally tend to have insufficient knowledge on the armed forces. At the same time, two of the three respondents evaluated the defense-related political decision-making silent, distanced from

¹⁰ According to his CV accessible on the website of the Parliament – though that particular site was updated last time in 2006.

¹¹ For more information on them, see the website of the committee at http://www.parlament.hu/internet/plsql/ogy_kpv.kepv_rip?P_CALL_MOD=%23KEPV_RIP&P_CKL=38&P_BIZ=null&P_BIZ=A276&P_EGYENI=I&P_TERULETI=I&P_ORSZAGOS=I&P_MEZO=null&P_SORREND=null Last accessed: 1st July 2009.

everyday political battles, and, what is perhaps the most important, efficient and functioning in a professional way. When analyzing the answers, one could make the – more or less obvious – observation that the higher ranking a soldier was, the more diversified picture he had on the higher levels of political decision-making, and the less negative his opinion was. This is in a sharp contrast with the mostly stereotype and desperate evaluations given by the cadets and the younger officers.

6. Conclusions

In spite of the not too supportive research environment and the limited size of the sample, the questionnaire research has produced a number of interesting and important results. As a general tendency, one might point out the significant differences (both in content and complexity) between the answers given by cadets and by older, higher-ranking officers. It seems military education alone is not enough to provide soldiers with a stable moral and ethic background, but service experience and the years spent in real service do matter a lot. Regarding the personal motivations of soldiers, interestingly enough the answers of cadets mostly confirmed the stereotypes they think the society has about them. On the other hand, the answers of more experienced officers were in line with the ethic and moral demands they think the armed forces of a country are to fulfill.

On the question of military ethos and ethics, one can easily recognize that the values presented by the survey and the ones promoted both by the military education system and by other documents (primarily by the Codex of Military Ethics) are in almost complete overlapping. However, the question remains open, whether this is a success of the military education system, or the official norms were set in such a way that they reflected the already existing set of values anyway. Taking into account that the Codex of Military Ethics was introduced only in 2004, the second option seems to be more probable.

The most surprising result of the survey was how negatively soldiers evaluated the society's perception of the armed forces. This was in strong contradiction with the official results of various surveys, which showed that the armed forces have a stable, high level of trust in the society. In our personal opinion this negative self-perception might be the result of the still existing bad memories of the conscript service, and also of the lack of knowledge on the system and operation of the new, professional army. In other words, negative stereotypes are more due to the lack of knowledge on the actual situation, and less to fresh, concrete, society-wide experiences.

The norms and principles of democratic control are fully accepted and internalized by the HDF. The criticism voiced was related not to the existence of civilian control, but to the lack of professionalism apparent in certain cases – at least according to the results of the survey. In the long run one might suppose that the on-going 'civilianization' of the military education (e.g. the growing number of civilians, who receive security and defense policy-related education) will have a positive effect on this, as new civilian professionals will gradually make it to the decision-making structures. Not surprisingly,

missions have a widespread support and understanding in the HDF, soldiers agree with the necessity of them, though with certain geographical differentiation. Interestingly enough, the 'threshold' of sending fighting forces, and not only combat support and logistical troops, which generated a strong public debate in the civil society, was not visible in the answers given to the questionnaire. It seems for the soldiers, who were, are or will be sent on missions, the actual mandate did not matter too much compared to the general fact of being deployed in a combat zone. However, the comments on the need to improve the equipment are important warning signs, which should be taken into consideration by the decision-makers.

Appendix

Translation of the Hungarian questionnaire used in the field research ¹²

1. General information

Age:

Sex:

Rank:

Time spent in military service:

Professional soldier, contracted or cadet:

Unit:

2. Personal motives, self-perception, ideals

What are your main personal goals in your military career? Have they changed with the year(s) passed?

What are the most important virtues of a soldier? (May they be different for men and women?)

What are the most important virtues and skills of a good military leader?

What are the most important elements of the military ethos?

What are the most important elements of the Hungarian military traditions?

Do you, as a soldier, represent some higher values, principles, ideals? If so, which ones?

3. The image of soldier in the society

Is there a debate going on in the Hungarian society on the expectations toward the armed forces, or on how the 'ideal soldier' should be?

Has the overall image of the HDF and of the military service changed in the Hungarian society since the transition? If so, how?

Are there any stereotypes in the Hungarian society about the soldiers? If so, what?

¹² With leaving out the specific expressions of politeness.

4. Democratic norms in the armed forces

How do you evaluate the norms of conflict settlement inside the armed forces? Are the relevant internal mechanisms suitable for the purpose (either through the service way, or out of it)?

How much do your human and democratic rights prevail in the army, or to what extent are they limited by the chain of subordination?

How much do you agree with the following statement: 'A soldier is primarily to serve his homeland, and should not care about politics.'

Do civilian subjects play an important role in the military education? (Such as constitutional law, political science, sociology, etc.) What do you think, do soldiers need such knowledge?

If you have learned such civilian subjects, how much did you find the course useful? Could you use the acquired knowledge in your everyday work?

5. Missions

How much do missions serve the national interests of Hungary?

Which missions of the HDF do you consider especially important from the perspective of national security? Or, are there any missions, which you consider useless, unnecessary, or have a 'What are we doing there?'-feeling about them?

How do you evaluate the attitude of the political leadership, and of politicians' toward the missions? What do you think, to what extent are they aware of the real nature, risks and dangers of the mission activities? To what extent are they ready to take responsibility for the soldiers?

How do you evaluate the mission participation of the HDF in practice? In what fields would improvement be necessary, and what are the 'success stories'?

How much do you consider the knowledge learnt on civil control and democratic norms being applicable during the missions?

Have you been on missions? If so, where, and for how long?

If you have been on missions, did you receive any specific training for the given mission? How do you evaluate it, was it efficient, could you take a good use of it on the field?

6. Other comments

If you consider anything important related to the topics mentioned above, please, write it here!

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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	English version	Hungarian original
ZMNDU	Zrínyi Miklós National Defence University	Zrínyi Miklós Nemzetvédelmi Egyetem
HDF	Hungarian Defense Forces	Magyar Honvédség
MoD	Ministry of Defense	Honvédelmi Minisztérium