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Is the normative model incorporated into the Czech military?

The Czech Republic 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

The research objective of this paper is to look into the question of whether real Czech soldiers meet the criteria of the normative model preferred by the Czech society. Therefore, the normative model of the ideal Czech soldier discussed in the previous papers will be used as the analytical framework for this study. Main information is provided by a survey conducted by the author by means of a standardized questionnaire in Fall 2008 and interview according to the standardized questionnaire in Spring 2009. Sociological surveys and research conducted by the MoD in 2004 are used as additional sources of information for this paper. The questionnaire prepared by PRIF was modified to fit the Czech conditions and applied (in October 2008) to a small group of 30 young soldiers with 1 – 4 years of military experience. Naturally, the data thus obtained might only be relevant for describing opinions of young soldiers. The data were collected through anonymous questionnaires with open-ended questions, and, thus, the answers were difficult to analyze. The original plan to use the method of interview had to be changed because, as it turned out, the soldiers were afraid to talk openly and frankly. The interview was tried on a sample of five persons with no reasonable results. In spring 2009, a research was conducted on a sample of 20 soldiers with more than 4 years of military experience. Most of them had participated in peace operations abroad. The data were collected through face to face interviews, using the same matrix as in fall 2008. Generally speaking, the soldiers included in the sample were willing to participate in the interviews and seemed to speak openly and frankly. Most of them are very self-confident. This paper is divided into four parts. After the introduction follow two parts with main findings. The last, fourth part concludes the paper.

2. Soldiers as citizens

The military in the Czech Republic didn't overtly interfere in the political discussions in their soldier capacity at the early phases of the transformation after 1993, when the Czech Republic was established. Neither do they do it today. The representatives of the army exercise great restraint in making public statements that might be given a political interpretation. That restraint contrasts especially with the situation that occurred in Poland in the first half of the 1990s.¹ There is no evidence to suggest that Czech soldiers perceive themselves as guardians of Czech national interests – an elite superior to the rest of the population.

¹ More about Poland Elizabeth P. Coughlan (1998): "Democratizing Civilian Control: The Polish Case", *Armed Forces & Society* 24, 4, pp. 525-529.

On the other hand, soldiers take part in democratic political process in the Czech Republic in their citizen capacity. Political preferences of soldiers changed and reached the parameters typical of the rest of the Czech population in the early 1990s and the period characterised by the prevalence of support for Communist party ended. Before the election in the year 1990 the Communists were preferred by 41% of regular soldiers according to research. In contrast to it, in 1991 only 13% of regular soldiers supported the Communist party.²

The level of the trust of Czech soldiers in the political institutions of the state is a relatively stable factor in the long term and, which is important; it tends to copy the development of the corresponding attitudes prevalent in the society at large. In the period 1996–2004, the trust of Czech soldiers in the office of president of the republic - the commander in chief of the military – varied, starting with 70.3% in 1996 and sinking to 45% in 2001 (during the presidency of V. Havel) only to rise again to 82.4% in 2004 (V. Klaus). The trust of soldiers in the government and parliament is much lower. It has been oscillating around the level of 30% for a long time, following roughly the same trajectory as in the rest of the society.³

On the basis of the analysis of the questionnaires, it is possible to conclude that young Czech soldiers (the first group) generally perceive themselves as citizens. Soldiers do not agree with the idea that they should not care about politics (21 out of 30). Their open ended and anonymous answers show that they see themselves as citizens who should be interested in political issues. On the other hand, their civic identity is weak – only 10 out of them see themselves as guardians of certain ideals (democratic values, patriotism, freedom, state sovereignty and peace). Furthermore, 20 soldiers in the tested sample do not think that politicians understand political, military or ethical circumstances of out of area missions. Their answers support the hypothesis that they do not trust Czech politicians. The soldiers included in the second group also perceive themselves as citizens. The majority of them think that, in their capacity of citizens, they should care about politics. Only 5 out of 20 agree with the statement that soldiers should just serve their nation and not care about politics. However, their civic identity does not seem to be very developed. This conclusion is supported by the following facts: 11 soldiers out of 20 do not see themselves as guardians of any ideals, 6 soldiers mentioned such ideas as state and national independence and sovereignty, and 3 mentioned peace. In addition, they usually do not vote, none of them has ever tried to stand as a candidate in parliamentary elections, and only one of them had been involved in politics at municipal level. The face to face interviews show that they are very critical of Czech political representation and they do not trust politicians at all. They accuse politicians of being corrupt, incompetent, selfish, arrogant and prejudiced against the military. As regards peace operation, 13 out of 20 soldiers do not believe that politicians understand political, military or ethical circumstances of these missions.

² Antonín Rašek (1993): “Demokratizace, humanizace, armáda: zkušenosti čtyř let (Democratization, humanization, military: experience of four years)”, *Vojenské rozhledy* 4, 10, pg. 13.

³ MoD Personnel Section (2004): *Vojáci důvěřují ve stejné míře ministroví obrany i náčelníkovi GŠ (Trust of soldiers in Minister of Defence is the same as their trust in the Chief of General Staff)*. Praha, pp. 2-3.

As regards the possibility of civic education, especially older soldiers are very critical of this idea. The explanation of this fact seems to be simple. They think that civic education is similar to the political indoctrination of the communist era. On the whole, there is no evidence to suggest that the military is a threat to the democracy in the Czech Republic. The available data do not show any significant differences between soldiers and civilians in terms of their respective levels of support to the institutions of the political system of this country – a difference one would suppose to be there if soldiers were opposed to the democratic regime. Nevertheless, the participation of soldiers in the democratic process is relatively low and tends to copy the attitudes prevalent in the society at large. Similarly, the civic identity of Czech soldiers is weak in the same way which is typical of the rest of the Czech society.

The Czech military has gradually become one of the most trusted (over a long period of time) state institutions. Survey conducted in March 2003 showed that the army was trusted by 61% citizens.⁴ The 2008 research shows that 67,6 % of population trust the Czech military.⁵ The levels of trust of the public in the army should always be perceived against the background of the general mistrust of Czech people toward the other institutions of the political system of the Czech Republic. The March 2004 CVM survey shows that only 24% respondents trust political parties, the MPs being trusted even less, by only 22% respondents. The only exception to this was the president, who was trusted by 75% respondents.⁶ In 2008, the government was trusted by 37, 3% and Parliament by 32, 4% of Czech population.⁷

Despite the fact that the military belongs to the most trusted institutions in the Czech society, young soldiers think that certain stereotypes and prejudices against military are typical of the majority of Czech society. According to the sample of young soldiers included in the survey, the public debate about the military is characterized by a low level of understanding to the military on the part of the public (mentioned 8 times) and undeserved criticism towards the military (mentioned 5 times). On the other hand, 9 soldiers believe that this debate is characterized by a positive attitude of the public towards the military. According to the results obtained from the questionnaires, the main stereotypes about the military held by the public are: soldiers are stupid, funding the military is a waste of money, soldiers are incapable of doing anything positive, and, finally, soldiers are lazy.

⁴ Centre for Public Opinion Research, Sociological Institute, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (2003): *Důvěra k některým institucím v naší společnosti a k lidem kolem nás*. (Trust to some institutions in our society and to people around us) Press release Pm40421. Praha, pg. 1.

⁵ University of Defense (2008): *Průzkum veřejného mínění. Armáda a společnost*. (Public opinion survey, Army and Society). Brno, p. 66.

⁶ Centre for Public Opinion Research, Sociological Institute, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic: *Důvěra k některým institucím v naší společnosti a k lidem kolem nás*. (Trust to some institutions in our society and to people around us) Press release Pm40421, pg. 1.

⁷ University of Defense (2008): *Průzkum veřejného mínění. Armáda a společnost*. (Public opinion survey, Army and Society). Brno, pg. 66.

Similar opinions were found in the second group of experienced soldiers. Only 4 in that group think that the public debate about the Czech military is characterized by positive attitudes while 12 believe that, because of the corruption scandals at the top level, the public perception of the military, as reflected in the debate, is getting less and less favorable to the army. On the other hand, 5 soldiers state that the situation improving due to professionalization, Czech military participation in out of area missions and the impressive performance of the Czech soldiers during floods in the last decade. Experienced soldiers have the same opinion about stereotypes held by the Czech public as young soldiers.

As regard individual right protection and internal conflicts, the comparison of these two groups gives very interesting results. According to the answers to the questionnaires (young soldiers), 22 out of 30 think that individual rights and liberties are protected in the Czech military, and almost half of them (14 out of 30) believe that Basic Order (military regulations) provide a sufficient solution to internal conflicts.⁸ More experienced soldiers are less optimistic and they approach Basic Order with much more skepticism. This conclusion is based on the fact that only 4 out of 20 soldiers think that Basic Order provides an adequate solution to conflicts in the military, while 12 soldiers out of 20 disagree. Furthermore, soldiers very often complain of the dogmatism with which the rules contained in that document are applied. Paradoxically, they also complain that the document is susceptible of various interpretations. Nevertheless, 14 out of 20 soldiers believe that their basic individual rights are well protected in the military. The results of personal interviews show that experienced soldiers know their rights and have personal experience of conflicts in the Czech military.

3. Soldiers as warriors and professionals

Sociological research indicates that Czech soldiers are ready to defend their country. The nihilistic and skeptical attitudes to defense widespread in certain parts of the Czech society are a rare occurrence in the Czech military. According to a research conducted in May and June 2004, 96% of Czech soldiers insist on the importance of defending the sovereignty of the Czech Republic, if necessary, at any cost. The view that it is pointless to even think of defending it, since, as it is a small country, it's fate will be decided by foreign powers anyway, is rejected by 87% and accepted by only 12%. According to the same research 84% of Czech soldiers are ready to go and fight in a war, if ordered to do so.⁹

⁸ But there is a small contradiction here. If their rights are really so well protected, why were the soldiers included in the pilot study reluctant to answer questions in the interviews?

⁹ MoD Personnel Section (2004): *Postoje vojáků k obraně země* (The attitudes of soldiers to defence of the country). Praha.

According to the questionnaires delivered to young soldiers in Fall 2008, the objective to defend the Czech Republic is generally considered to be an important military duty because 24 out of 30 participants mentioned this point. On the one hand, it seems to be in agreement with the ideal model. Nevertheless, since 17 participants said that they had decided to serve in the military because of money and social status, and moral duty and patriotism were mentioned 5 times, adventure 4 times and family tradition twice, the reality seems to be more complicated. Most soldiers included in the sample - 23 out of 30 - do not consider themselves followers of a specific military tradition. Only 7 mention some Czech military traditions, especially legionary and antifascist resistance traditions.¹⁰ The young respondents generally do not prefer a purely military style of leadership. It was predictable and this conclusion is not in contradiction with the ideal model of the Czech soldier because of the penetration of managerial methods of leadership into the military is supported by the top military management.

The soldiers in the second group (experienced soldiers) are also aware their duties. Defense of the country is considered the main motivation for military service by 17 out of 20 respondents. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the Czech Republic has been a NATO member since 1999, the defense of the Czech Republic's allies is mentioned as personal motivation only twice. In comparison with young soldiers, less emphasis is put on money and social status (5 out of 20) as the main impetus for military service. The reasons of soldiers for serving in the military vary from interest in military hardware, to desire to work with people, through to family tradition. In comparison with young soldiers, only 6 out of 20 respondents do not consider themselves followers of a specific military tradition. The majority of soldiers mention legionary and antifascist resistance traditions. The respondents generally prefer combination of military and managerial styles of leadership. However, in comparison with young soldiers, more stress is put on military leadership.

Interpretation of the data is a problem but, in general, we can conclude that social status, money and having a well-paid job are the main motives of young soldiers for joining the military. Experienced soldiers stress other factors, especially working with people, interest in military hardware and family tradition. It is possible to assume that soldiers who put money first have not served in the military for a long time. In general, soldiers realize that the main goal of their service in the armed forces is to defend the Czech Republic. The above data suggest that Czech soldiers are fully aware of the importance of defending their country, if the need arises, and are not skeptical about the value of defense. If our interpretation of the above data is correct, the Czech military meets the expectations of both Czech political elites and the public at large in being ready to defend their country.

¹⁰ Since the questions were open-ended, the respondents could mention as many motives as they wished.

With respect to the military crises management operations the available data shows that soldiers are ready to participate in them. According to the latest available big survey, in 2004, 87% Czech soldiers agreed with the deployment of the Czech army in Kosovo, 68% agreed with the deployment of Czech soldiers in Afghanistan and 66% agreed with deployment of the Czech military in Iraq.¹¹ In general, the Czech military fulfils the expectation of the Czech society.

The analysis of the answers in questionnaires gives similar results. Young soldiers generally support the Czech participation in out of area missions. As the main reason the respondents mentioned helping allies and fulfilling obligations (10 out of 30). Face to face interviews with experienced soldiers show that they support Czech participation in out of area missions (19 out of 20). As the main reason, they mention helping allies, fulfilling obligations and providing peace and humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, soldiers in neither group think that the Czech Republic should take part in these operations more often. Especially experienced soldiers are aware that the Czech military is “mission overloaded”.

It is difficult to assess the quality of the Czech army and Czech career soldiers in terms of their defense capability. The Czech military establishment generally holds that the Czech soldier’s participation in military operations of crisis management proves that the Czech military is comparable to the other NATO armies. This is in agreement with the publicly available appraisals by NATO organs of the Czech participation in military operation of crisis management.

An interesting question is how the soldiers themselves view the professional qualities of the Czech military and its combat readiness. According to a sociological research conducted in May and June 2004, 76% soldiers trust the capability of the Czech army to provide external security to the Czech Republic, and 64% consider the Czech military well trained in the use and operation of military equipment and hardware.¹² As regards the quality of the training of the armed forces, 64% say that it is good.¹³ On the other hand, soldiers are highly critical of the quality of the equipment itself – 81% consider it technologically obsolete. Besides, it is an alarming fact that only 43% of Czech soldiers believe that the morale and discipline of the Czech armed forces is high, while 56% disagree.¹⁴ According to the survey based on questionnaires among young soldiers, the low quality of military training is the deficit of the Czech military because 15 respondents mentioned this point. On the other hand, experienced soldiers mention this point only 3 times. Only 3 soldiers out of 20 believe that poor quality is characteristic of Czech

¹¹ MoD Personnel Section (2004): *Postoje vojáků k naší účasti v Kosovu, Afghánistánu a Iráku* (The attitudes of soldiers to our participation in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq). Praha.

¹² MoD Personnel Section (2004): *Armáda je bojeschopná a dobře vycvičena, ale má zastaralou výzbroj* (The Czech army is able to fight and well trained but has out of date equipment). Praha.

¹³ MoD Personnel Section (2004): *V atraktivitě výcviku jsou větší rezervy než v jeho kvalitě* (The Czech military training suffers more from lack of attractiveness than lack of quality). Praha.

¹⁴ MoD Personnel Section (2004): *Armáda je bojeschopná a dobře vycvičena, ale má zastaralou výzbroj* (The Czech army is able to fight and well trained but has out of date equipment). Praha.

military training. Among the main deficiencies of the Czech military mentioned by them are the low level of the knowledge of foreign languages, poor managerial skills of top commanders and instability in personnel policy.

As regard “Code of Ethics for Career Soldiers and Active Reserves” the answers in the questionnaires reveal one very important deficit of young soldiers. It has been found out that a lot of young soldiers do not understand the values of the Czech military ethics code. According to the questionnaires, 12 out of 30 answer that they do not know what it is. The rest mention such values bravery (10), honor (6), pride (4), self/sacrifice (3), respect to authorities (3), loyalty (3) and patriotism (3). This finding is very surprising and alarming because the code is part of the military oath and soldiers should understand the values associated with it. The second group (experienced soldiers) understands the Code much better. Generally speaking, soldiers in that group know its values and seem to understand (at least in the interviews) their importance.

4. Conclusion

The available data on the implementation of the model of the ideal soldier in the Czech army do not allow us to draw an unequivocal conclusion. On the one hand, there are no symptoms to suggest that the army poses a threat to the democratic regime. On the other hand, the sense of civic identity of both young and experienced Czech soldiers is rather weak, in which respect the situation is again similar to the one in the civilian society. Experienced soldiers are critical of the idea of civic education in the military while young soldiers, generally speaking, do not know what civic education is or could be. In view of the required parameters of the ideal model, it could be regarded as a serious problem. Nevertheless, the army is ready to defend the Czech Republic against an external attack and to participate in military operations of crisis management.

In fact, the level of the trust of soldiers in the political institutions copies the attitudes of the society at large. Both young and experienced soldiers are very critical of the Czech political elites. But this only reflects the general opinion in the Czech society and cannot be regarded as an evidence of non-loyalty. On the contrary, the fact that both soldiers and civilians share the same attitudes to the political elites can be interpreted as supporting the hypothesis that the Czech military is deeply rooted in the Czech civic society.

Publicly available materials appraising the participation of Czech soldiers in military operations of crisis management suggest that their professional qualities are high. But this still leaves open the question of what the situation is in the rest of the Czech armed forces, not participating in these operations. Most Czech soldiers themselves believe that the Czech armed forces are well trained and combat ready, nevertheless, they often complain that the arms and equipment of the forces are obsolete. On the other hand we

know that there is some criticism of the quality of military training, especially among young soldiers. Soldiers with experience gained in out of area missions are not skeptical about the quality of their military training. Empirical data seem to support the hypothesis that the younger the soldiers, the more critical they are of the quality of military training. This understandable because the soldiers included in the first group have not taken part in advanced military training for peace support operation and most of them have only gone through basic military training.

As the main deficit can be seen the fact that according to the normative model Czech soldiers are supposed to understand the military ethics and its values but, unfortunately, according to the survey conducted on the sample of thirty young soldiers they do not understand them. The experienced soldiers, on the other hand, are familiar with those values. Furthermore, soldiers are supposed to understand the Czech military traditions, which again do not seem to be the case in young soldiers. Experienced soldier show better understanding of Czech military traditions.

We can conclude that there is no significant contradiction (whose existence could be considered a threat to the democratic regime) between the image of the ideal soldier preferred by the Czech political elites and public at large on the one hand, and the factual condition of the Czech military on the other hand. The only problem there seems to be the lack of understanding military values and Czech military traditions on the part of young soldiers. On the other hand, the research also shows that soldiers can learn to understand them during military service. According to the research, experienced soldiers understand them much better. Nevertheless, these partial conclusions have to be tested and confirmed by further, deeper research, involving deep sociological investigation on a larger sample of soldiers.