Social Problems of Military Organization in Ukrainian Society

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The social and political changes affecting Ukrainian society in the last two decades have led to a thorough transformation of all its spheres, not least the military. The latter has experienced severe problems in that period of time, which demanded analysis as well as policy recommendations. Offering to answer such needs in harmony with the Ukrainian school, on November 27th, 2009, this writer defended her dissertation in “special branch sociology”, entitled The Peculiarities of Social Issues in Ukrainian Military Organization.

An Analytic-Synthetic Model of Social Problems in Military Organization

Its author, borrowing from the structure-activity approach, developed a model that is at one and the same time synthetic and analytical, and can be exported to other sectors and organizations in the Ukraine of the great transition period. It can even prove useful in cross-national comparisons.

The model has six research dimensions, to be approached stepwise. In the first, a sociocultural analysis of military organization is offered based on Peter Shtompka’s INIO analytical scheme (Ideology, Norms, Interactions, Opportunities). Comparative analysis of the writings of foreign social scientists brought the author to conclude that the military is a strongly structured, ‘esoterical’, isolated, and closed organization marked by a hierarchical structure and constrained interactions, as well as dominated by informal norms, traditions and communication processes. Likewise, reading through the native and foreign sociological literature on that topic led her to use the work of St. Petersburg sociologist Natalia Danilova as the main tool of analysis in the study of the military’s organizational culture (symbols, traditions, norms, etc.).

On the second dimension, the model, borrowing from the writings of Ukrainian sociologist Alla Lobanova, proposes to study the social activities of military actors. Soldiers

1 The Ukrainian school of military sociology has old research traditions. Its most prominent authors have written on military education (O. Mazuric), Army reform in Ukraine (M. Trebin), military professionalism and officer careers (Y. Kalagin), and informal/deviant relationships (A. Pronoza).

2 Reference is made here to classic western authors such as Stanislav Andreski, Samuel Huntington, Morris Janowitz and Charles Moskos who in the last half century and more wrote about military organization and civil-military relations in terms of systemic (participation in military conflicts, armed services and the State) and subsystemic dimensions (service members’ integration into the military’s social and cultural environment). But also to many others who focused, notably and of special interest here, on veteran rehabilitation and adjustment back to civilian life of returnees from small wars and peace support operations, military families or defence welfare programmes. References likewise include Russian military sociologists who have paid a great deal of attention to research on retired officers’ welfare (V. Serebryannikov), the social adaptability to changing circumstances of both rank and file and officers (L. Peven), interaction between the services and religion (E. Dubograi), as well as to informal and deviant relationships (Y. Solnyshkov).
and officers, according to foreign and native sociologists, are affected by a state of anomie, cultural trauma and existential self-centredness. In their activity, service members use strategies of social mimicry and passive adaptation.

On the third dimension, social practices are analyzed as the outcomes of interactions between the sociocultural organization and social actors, using Russian sociologist D. Arganat’s classification of social practice in military organization into ritualizing, deviant, disciplinary and reformation varieties.

The fourth dimension or stage consists in classifying social problems in the military, distinguishing between three levels: 1) sociocultural features (problems that are directly caused by specific structures and organizational culture of the military organization); 2) military actors (problems resulting from the actions of military agents); 3) interactions of the military organization with other social organizations (problems arising notably from the military’s place in Ukrainian society). The fifth dimension/stage focuses on how actors of different social statuses articulate certain social issues and represent their community. The sixth and last stage addresses the organization’s survival strategies in the treatment of urgent social problems, and analyzes the opportunities of social organization and the actors in it.

Military Organization and its Social Actors

The ensuing empirical research yielded the following results. The social and cultural fields were found to follow the features of the organizational culture of military organizations elsewhere: total coercion, isolation, esoteric structure regulated by statutes and orders. In addition to official regulatory devices, informal rules, ritualized customs and traditions were brought to light. There were significant differences between formal and informal levels in the structure of the military organization. Moreover, the study found that some of its features needlessly duplicate each other and call for further reform. It revealed that the rigidity, closure and isolation of the military organization give rise to serious problems.

As regards the social activities of military personnel, soldiers were observed to live in very narrow social circles, and to suffer insufficient life-chances and resources to address their needs; their opportunities to access social networks were limited. As a result, service members can be said to be in a state of profound cultural trauma and existential doubt as to their commitment. From Defenders of the State and Nation, they have been turned into marginal, low-status job-holders who are themselves in need of social protection by the State. They are socially inert and passively adapt to existing conditions of social reality. Officers are reported to live through a crisis, where their expected honour and dignity have been completely levelled, or replaced by cynicism and self-interest. For adaptive purposes, they mainly resort to strategies of mimicry and adaptation. They thus find themselves effectively excluded from the social structure. A high level of distrust of authorities and NGOs leads soldiers to prefer their own independent treatment of social problems, relying mainly on relatives and friends. But in most cases, their low social capital and resources make their action to that effect ineffective.
Social Problems of Military Organization in Today’s Ukrainian Society

Among the three levels of social problems identified in stage four above, each has its own characteristics and consequences. At the first level (organizational culture and its outcomes), the current situation has inherited a steep decline in officers’ professional corporate ethics, as witnessed by the substitution over time of self-interest, lobbying, lack of thirst for further education, unwillingness to bear the burden of personal responsibility, and careerism for self-sacrifice, loyalty and integrity, or a healthy desire for career growth and corresponding cultivation of professional skills. Of course, such manifestations make the process of uniting the officer corps very difficult, and most officers acutely feel the lack of such corporateness in their own environment. This eclipse of military professionalism in turn leads to low morale, breaches of discipline, corruption, and a reduction in the number of young people wishing to serve in the military.

The second level (agents) is associated with a wide range of psychological and social problems, such as crime (theft, murder), deviant informal relations (‘dedovshchina’: hazing) and suicide. Health issues should not be underestimated either: physical and nervous stress, aggressive behaviour, dissatisfaction, socio-psychological maladjustment, material and sexual deprivation, subordination and communication problems, conflict among peers make for a worrying deterioration of the social and psychological climate in groups. Rehabilitation of veterans of small wars and local conflicts, treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, and remedial welfare programmes have become major concerns.

Special reference should be made to the fate of women soldiers. In the Armed Forces of Ukraine, there are currently about 19,000 women, including more than 1,100 officers, almost 2,500 ensigns, 14,500 sergeants and rank and file soldiers under contract, plus more than 100 cadets. The surveys, interviews and literature reviews conducted by this author clearly indicate that servicewomen are faced with a wide spectrum of social problems. They articulate some of them: poor welfare programmes, lack of institutional adjustment to their presence in military settings (notably indifference to women’s privacy), as well as compensation packages that are unrelated to the actual burdens of military life. More generally, they suffer from career opportunities still strongly influenced by gender imbalance and stereotypes.

On the third level (problems arising from social and cultural interaction of the military organization with other Ukrainian organizations), the salient fact – and most pressing problem – resides in the marginalization of a disorganized old military system, further disturbed by attempts to create a new, all-volunteer combat-ready military seeking to emulate European standards. Among the recommendations made by the author are the introduction of effective civilian control, social partnership and dialogue, the infusion of a degree of spirituality, as well as earnest attempts at improving the public image of military units and the establishment as a whole.
Conclusion

To solve its social problems, the Ukrainian military should establish effective relations with the public and gain practical experience in keeping itself in the public eye. It should in particular be involved with such professional institutions and associations as the media, universities, research institutions and NGOs in order to improve its rapport with the population. Urgent problems require close attention. Social science can help solve them by identifying reform concepts and programmes. The proposed analytical-synthetic model presented here provides such policy by-products. Based on the structure-activity approach, an effective methodological foundation for the comprehensive analysis of social problems of military organization, it advances ways to resolve them. Its practical application would set priorities for reform, enhance the social well-being of military personnel, and increase their chances of adapting to the society.

Bibliography


