Diagnosis of the Implementation of the Academic Legion Student Military Education Program

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ABSTRACT:
The authors discussed the results of their own theoretical and empirical research on the student military education program called Academic Legion (Legia Akademicka). The research started in 2019 and involved a group of students who have been trained within the practical part of this program at the Engineering-Aviation Training Centre in Dęblin. The research presents general information about the conception and legal basis of the Academic Legion Program as well as the most important conclusion regarding the results of this research. The authors evaluate the results of the program through the prism of two editions that have been conducted so far, with the main focus on the second edition accomplished in the 2018/2019 academic year.

KEYWORDS:
Academic Legion Program, military education, voluntary military training of students, armed forces, personnel reserve
Introduction

After the suspension of compulsory types of active military service in Poland in 2009,1 a gradual regression in the process of building up personnel reserves for the Polish Armed Forces (PAF) has become noticeable. The training of citizens of age of conscription under basic military service was discontinued; as a result, the personnel reserves, especially in the corps of privates and non-commissioned officers, ceased to receive reserve soldiers in numbers sufficient to ensure the proper functioning of the system of supplying the PAF personnel reserves. This also led to a regression in the system of accumulating resources of the reserve staff coming from the military training of students and university graduates. Indeed, the steady influx of trained reserve soldiers of various fields of study and scientific disciplines, e.g. computer scientists, cybernetics specialists, mathematicians or cryptologists, into the resources in the non-commissioned officer and officer corps was cut off. This unfavorable trend was expected to be curbed by the National Reserve Forces (NRF), but they have never reached the planned personnel levels (20,000 people). The incentive system for NRF soldiers and their employers proved to be poorly appealing.2 Despite a clear decrease in the number of the NRF soldiers,3 the Ministry of Defense “maintains [...] the performance of the National Reserve Forces in military units,”4 by introducing new forms of acquiring personnel reserves.

The Academic Legion military education program for students has become a flagship MoD undertaking to restore the academic community’s sources of supply for the PAF personnel reserves. Its authors envisaged such solutions, legislative and legal ones in particular, that would allow for quick establishment of conditions for restoring the capabilities of a constant inflow of military trained students and graduates by the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland, thus facilitating the replenishment of the reserve officers corps and, concurrently, opening perspectives for their professional military service.

At present, the program is focused on acquiring reserve soldiers in the staff corps of privates and non-commissioned officers. Only after the introduction of appropriate legislative solutions, sanctioning the inclusion of voluntary military training of students in Poland’s legal order, as well as the establishment of a reserve officer training system corresponding to the said solutions, will it be in place to say that the “Academic Legion” program represents the core of the acquisition and training of student volunteers for the needs of the personnel officer reserve corps.

To evaluate and assess this program, social research on its individual themes, the most relevant in terms of the possible follow-up and further improvement of the project, was

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2 This was confirmed in the 2010 audit of the Supreme Audit Office (NIK) on the state of professionalization of the Polish Armed Forces on the example of selected military units, KOB-4101-05-00/2010.

3 Ministry of Defense data shows that the NRF currently number 2,200 soldiers, a decrease of more than 10,000 soldiers compared to 2016.

launched in 2019. The main themes were deemed diagnosis of the program implementation status, evaluation of its information and promotion campaign, and evaluation of the drafts of the target model of voluntary military training for civilian students.

The article focuses on the first theme, i.e. presenting a synthetic assessment of the “Academic Legion” implementation status. The basis for the assessment were the results of the 2nd program edition social research in the academic year 2018/2019. First, the general program objectives and the conditions of its performance in the legal realities of both the Polish Army and higher education were analyzed. Then, the implementation of the “Academic Legion” was evaluated against the results of empirical research. This allowed for drawing conclusions concerning the evaluation of the program’s performance and for identifying possible areas for increasing its effectiveness.

This paper is addressed to both politicians responsible for the process of development of the Polish Armed Forces, and functional persons employed in MoD institutions and organizational units involved in the scheduling, coordination and implementation of the “Academic Legion” program, as well as other related programs, e.g. certified uniformed classes. Experience shows that, although underestimated, the target audience of the article ought to include military unit commanders, that is, the main beneficiaries of the program, directly responsible for the maintenance and training of personnel reserves.

Literature Review

The “Academic Legion” is a new Polish Armed Forces program, so reliable studies on it are scarce. Such a state of affairs has also been impacted by the classified nature of part of the indirectly addressed issues, mainly concerning the PAF mobilization system. As many related questions are not discussed in open studies and scientific publications, the available literature presents only a generic description of selected areas of personnel reserve system preparation under the professionalization of the Polish Armed Forces. The “Academic Legion” program represents one such area.

The lack of subject literature ensues also from the simple fact that the majority of scientific studies on PAF personnel reserves had been published before the period of PAF professionalization. Therefore, in the current terms, thus with the existing voluntary types of military service, references to the said studies are unfounded.

Methodology

Theoretical and empirical methods were used for the purpose of this publication. As per the theoretical methods, analysis and synthesis and comparison and inference were used.

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The available literature on the field of national security was analyzed, and analytical reports and press materials on the “Academic Legion” were used.

The diagnostic survey method was used during the empirical research; thus the technique of compiling surveys, as well as interviews with students participating in the program. The analyzed edition of the “Academic Legion” was implemented in Dęblin in the period from June to August 2019; for the theoretical part - at the Air Force Military Academy, and for the practical part - at the Engineering and Aviation Training Center.

Ninety (90) people participated in the survey; three (3) surveys were rejected in the verification process. Since the research concerned the theoretical and practical part of the program, for research purposes, the study population was considered to be those who received cards of appointment for military exercises in the practical part of the second edition of the program, i.e. 2,980 persons (as of June 29, 2019). Such baseline data allowed for precise calculation of the maximum statistical error of 10%. The interview method was used to clarify and detail the findings of the study. Interviews were conducted with five randomly selected students.

Results and Discussion

General “Academic Legion” Program Background and Objectives

The first document outlining the program was the Military Student Education Concept for the Academic Legion – Pilot Project, approved by the Minister of National Defense on June 26, 2017. Conceptually, the program was targeting first- and second-level, full-time and part-time, both male and female students. Those students were considered to have the potential to become a source of supply for the PAF personnel reserves. The program was expected to encourage university students to participate in military training and to volunteer for military exercises to become reserve soldiers.

Consistent long-term program implementation is expected to allow for:

– Developing long-term systemic solutions concerning voluntary military training of students for the purposes of rebuilding the PAF personnel reserves in the academic environment;
– Acquiring skilled and superbly trained staff for the needs of the national defense system, not only the department of national defense, but also other state services, the arms industry, and structures of the non-military system;
– Boosting the defense awareness of students as future decision-makers, engineers, managers, specialists, i.e., those who will find employment in the national economy sector, both in state structures and in the private industry, often as managerial staff
– Promoting good defense knowledge and military skills among students;
– Building a positive image of the Polish Armed Forces and promoting the Polish Army in the civilian environment, primarily in the academic environment.

The introduction of the voluntary military student training “Academic Legion,” apart from its main objective, thus to acquire trained personnel reserves for the needs of mobilization and war replenishment of the Polish Armed Forces, is also expected to serve the purpose of broadening the pool of potential candidates for territorial defense forces and professional military service in various staff corps, in particular in the NCO and officer corps.
The main measure of the program enactment is the total number of trained students. This number be comparable to the average annual limit of reserve soldiers to be trained as part of military exercises, as determined by the Chief of the General Staff of the Army. For the “Academic Legion” program, it is set at up to 5,000 people per year.

So far, the program has had two editions. The first, pilot one, was launched at the beginning of the academic year 2017/2018 and was run on the basis of Decision no. 146/MON of July 13, 2017 and agreements between the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MSHE),7 and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Inland Navigation (MMAIN).8 Furthermore, on June 6, 2018, the Ministry of Defense signed an agreement whereby the Higher School of Social and Media Culture of Toruń joined the program. In the first edition, the recruitment of students was carried out only in the participating universities. A total of 61 universities applied, of which 56 and five were civilian and military, respectively.

The second edition of the program was launched coinciding with the second term of the academic year 2018/2019. The edition of the “Academic Legion” was organized and run on the basis of Decision no. 48/MON of March 26, 2019, and the agreements between the Minister of Defense, the Ministers of Science and Higher Education, and Maritime and Inland Navigation, which remain in force until the year 2021. Sixty-three universities, of which 51 public universities, five non-public universities, five military academies, and two maritime universities, joined its theoretical part.

The third edition of the program has been running since the beginning of the academic year 2019/2020. The edition had been preceded by an intensive information and promotion campaign combined with the recruitment of students. In the course of the information campaign, the Ministry of Defense invited the departments that have universities and colleges on their board to participate in the program such as the Ministry of Interior and Administration, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, and the Ministry of Health. The said departments have declared their participation in the program as of the academic year 2020/2021. A total of 84 universities, of which 56 public universities, 21 non-public universities, two maritime academies, and five military universities, have applied to participate in the program in the 2019/2020 edition.

In total, 8,740 students joined the theoretical part of the program,9 of which 6,423 students completed it; 6,078 students jointed the practical part, of which 5,107 students completed it, of which 5,107 were promoted to the rank of reserve corporal.
Participants’ Opinions About the Program – Empirical Findings

A variety of factors (indicators) were analyzed during the evaluation of the “Academic Legion” program, which made it possible to precisely determine its usefulness and potential. In particular, attention was paid to the motives that guided students’ decisions to participate in the program, as well as their implications in the context of motivation theory.

In order to determine students’ satisfaction with participation in the program and its various parts, reference was made to the basis of Burrhus F. Skinner’s theory of motivation – the so-called reinforcement theory, which states that people are inclined to replicate actions that have brought them success in the past and have been a source of pleasant experiences, while they tend to avoid actions that are associated with failure and unpleasant experiences. The results of these studies are presented in Figures 1-2.

An analysis of the responses to the question about how satisfied they were with their participation in the Academic Legion program shows that most participants felt satisfied with their participation. No respondents indicated negative answers rather dissatisfied and definitely dissatisfied; the most frequent answers were rather satisfied and definitely satisfied. This means that students highly appreciated the level of classes, especially the practical part of the training.

The answers to the question about evaluation of the program preparation in terms of organization lead to the conclusion that the organization of the program should still be evaluated and improved. Although the dominant answer is rather good, more than 34% of respondents neutrally evaluate the organizational side of the program. It is important, however, that the students do not relate this opinion to the whole organization of the program, but only to the minor organizational problems that became visible at the university level in its initial phase. As shortcomings of the university, they most often mentioned lack of or difficult access to information about the program, lack of or difficult access to information about where and when to enroll in the program, lack of a person responsible for the program (university coordinator), and starting only one training group at the Air Force Academy, and that with a limited number of places (30 people). The survey showed that many students willing to participate in the program could not attend it.

The new draft decision of the Ministry of Defense concerning the “Academic Legion” program takes into account the aforementioned problems, as it specifies the tasks of universities related to the enrolment of students and defines the main assumptions of the information and promotional campaign for the program.

Respondents were also asked about their opinion of each part of the program. The responses are illustrated in Figures 3-5.

More than half of the respondents rated rather good the theoretical part of the program, which took place at the university. As the positive aspect, students most often

indicated the manner (form) of conducting classes. Such responses confirm the earlier conclusion about the good selection of qualified teaching staff and the high level of classes. As another positive aspect, the respondents have considered the interesting subject matter of classes, which means that the educational contents for the program were selected correctly. As far as the negative aspects of this part of the program are concerned,
persons surveyed included lack of opportunity to obtain self-study materials, too many people in groups, lack of time for self-study, too many hours in one training day, and too little content related to the end-of-training exam.

In order to eliminate the aforementioned shortcomings of the theoretical part, the Ministry of Defense has made efforts to create an educational e-learning platform for the “Academic
Figure 3. Distribution of responses to the question: How would you rate the theory part?
1 – definitely bad; 2 – rather bad; 3 – neutral; 4 – rather good; 5 – definitely good

Authors’ own study

Legion.” This will enable both students and teaching staff to use the training materials posted on it. As of this year, in order to make training at universities more attractive, a military unit patronage institution a will be launched; it will support academic staff in conducting training classes, in particular in issues concerning military specialization, i.a. tactics and shooting training.
When asked about the duration of the theoretical part, the vast majority of respondents (67%) said that it is sufficient and permits mastering the presented content of training. At the same time, students suggested that the classes be held more often, and thus last shorter in one training day.

Figure 4: Distribution of responses to the question: How would you rate the practical part?
1 - definitely bad; 2 - rather bad; 3 - neutral; 4 - rather good; 5 - definitely good
Authors’ own study
The practical part was considered the best part of the whole program. The vast majority of students rated it *good*. Such activities as fire training (shooting), terrain science and tactics, were rated best. Respondents who gave negative marks to the practical part of the training indicated insufficient number of battlefield simulations, inappropriate
approach of some instructors, and frequent changes in training schedules. However, as many as 36 people considered the lack of time to study some issues (self-education) as the most important negative factor. The respondents expressed the opinion that time longer than specified in the training program is needed to assimilate the knowledge and to master the skills properly in case of some training issues. At the same, time they declared their readiness to take part in longer practical training. This was also confirmed during diagnostic survey (Fig. 5).

Most of the respondents think that the duration of the practical part is rather too short. In their opinion, the training period in particular modules should be extended and last two to three weeks. This is an important suggestion and should be taken into account in further deliberations on the target model of the “Academic Legion” program.

Based on the evaluation of the whole program and its individual parts, conclusions may be drawn that students generally evaluate its functioning well. This was confirmed in the question concerning recommending participation in the program to other students (friends). Only 3% of the respondents would not recommend it to their friends, while as many as 85% found the program to be an adventure of their lifetime, a chance to gain unique civilian experiences and skills (Fig. 6). Many students viewed their participation in the program as a test of strength and character, stating that it would give them confidence in crisis situations, in particular in their professional lives following graduation.

An analysis of the students’ responses to the remaining research questions reveals that the “Academic Legion” program, despite some shortcomings, largely due to its short duration, evokes considerable interest in the academic community. This is an optimistic
observation and a premise for continuing the project, taking further actions aimed at its development and elimination of shortcomings that could negatively affect the achievement of the assumed level and potential of the program.

Conclusions

In the current legal environment, the main objective of the program is to recreate the potential of personnel reserves in the corps of privates and non-commissioned officers by using the academic environment. At this stage of the program, the main effort of the organizers is focused on providing the trainees with basic knowledge from the individual soldier level and on preparing them for the NCO exam.

Sixty-one (61) universities joined the theoretical part in the pilot edition; in total, they organized 210 training groups. There were 5,558 students enrolled in the program; 164 of them did not join the training. Of those, 3,831 participants passed the theoretical part, which constitutes 71% of the total number of trainees. Applications for appointment in voluntary mode were submitted by 3,487 persons. The practical training was successfully completed by 2,719 participants, of which 2,040 students became reserve corporals.

The analysis of the data shows that, a relatively large number of people did not complete the theoretical part – almost 1,600, in the pilot edition of the program. In the second edition, however, the theoretical part was not completed by 325 of 3,634 participants, thus less than 10% of those trained. Despite significant improvement, it is advisable to take steps to reduce the number of participants who do fail. Lack of sufficient preparation for theoretical exams was also confirmed in empirical research.
There was less interest in the second edition of the program. Compared with the pilot edition, there was a 43% smaller group of participants in the second edition of the program. However, the balance of practical training shows that the numbers of students who completed this part of training were comparable in both editions of the program. This is due to the fact that the pilot edition of the program used the resources of all year groups, while the second edition mainly used the resources of the first year groups only. The turnout and lower interest in the second edition of the program may also have been influenced by the late commencement of the information and promotion campaign. The results of empirical research indicate that the program should be promoted on a large scale not only in the campaign, i.e. in the period preceding the theoretical part of the program, but also during its duration (from October to September).

The research reveals, not without influence on the further programming and development of the “Academic Legion,” that the majority of the respondents associate their plans with professional military service (Fig. 7). This may suggest that some of the participants treat their participation in the Academic Legion as the proverbial “shortcut” – an opportunity to attain the rank of corporal in a short period of time, a rank that is hard to earn in active service. The challenge for the initiators of the project will be to reverse this trend in favor of conscious and properly motivated participation of the academic community in rebuilding the potential of personnel reserves of the Polish Armed Forces as one of the most important pillars of the national defense system.

Although the results of empirical research presented in the article clearly indicate the success of the program and its great potential, its shortcomings may not be overlooked. They should be taken into account while planning and organizing the next rounds of training and programming the target model of voluntary military training of students.

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