Gender Issues and National Defence in Post-Communist Societies
Presentation at Columbia University, SIPA, Harriman Institute
© Merle Maigre, NATO Liaison Office Ukraine
12 April, 2007

1. Introduction

My presentation focuses on the role of women in defence institutions in the Post-Soviet society. I am looking at changes that the end of the Cold War has brought along for the security and defence field of post-Communist countries. I am also looking at how these changes may have influenced the perspectives of women to make a career in defence structures. I suggest that problems still exist for women in defence policy sector, but those problems are part of a larger set of difficulties concerning civil-military relations in post-Soviet societies. Problems exist even though a number of the former Soviet-block states have fulfilled the political conditions for becoming a member of NATO and EU.

First, I analyse the setup of the Soviet defence sector and establish the role of gender issues – or the absence of it – within the Soviet military system. Second, I look at changes that have occurred after the breakup of the Soviet system and the implications of that on the presence of women in defence institutions. I draw on experience of post-Soviet Estonia, because that is a country I am most familiar with.

2. Communist Era Defence Sector

Under the Communist system, gender issues as such was not an issue, because in the Soviet Union, military personnel dominated the defence and security sectors. The armed forces were given a high degree of autonomy with regard to the development and implementation of the defence policy. Even if there were any civilians employed in the Soviet Ministry of Defence, they were all given military ranks.

Thus, during the Soviet times, the strategic defence planning was independent of any civilian control. The Soviet officers themselves made decisions about the direction and size of the armed forces. Security policy and doctrines were formed by the military. Men in uniforms exerted control over themselves in the chief political decision-making bodies, because they had the monopoly and expertise. Defence was a purely military issue. Defence policy came from within the military sphere. Civilian men or women had no role in there.

Nor did women have much business in joining the armed forces. In the Cold War era, the primary purpose of the military was to fight conventional wars. Armed forces were prepared for the threat of territorial fighting. Thus, according to the Cold War thinking, the armed forces represented a masculine culture. It was believed that war called forth aggressive and violent qualities, because the military was in the business for killing. An ideal soldier was a brave, physically strong and emotionally tough warrior, a hero. War and the preparation for it was seen as an entirely masculine activity and the military experience was an initiation into manhood. Women had no role in there.

3. Changes in Defence After the End of the Cold War

What kind of changes did the end of the Cold War bring along for the nature of war and defence? And what were the implications of this to the gender issues?

Regarding the changes of the role of women in the armed forces, the end of the Cold War completely changed the security environment. The disappearance of the Soviet threat changed geopolitical landscape. With the collapse of the Soviet block, the bipolar deterrence
lost its legitimacy – there was no longer a need to deter a known opponent, but to intervene instead in new sorts of conflicts.

Together with the Allied countries and in the framework of the NATO Partnership for Peace programme set up in 1994, post-Soviet block states started to get engage in modern complex humanitarian emergencies. Modern conflicts consisted of much wider problems than merely military. The problems and causes involved social, cultural, religious, economic and political dimensions. Together with the military, the civilians played an increasingly bigger role in conflict management in side with the military.

As a consequence of the technological developments in warfare, the armed forces needed more people with the necessary specialist technical and organizational skills. And these are skills held equally by women as well as by men. Social demands for equal opportunities in employment in defence sector were emphasized. Similarly, the armed forces started to reflect the values and practices of the society which those forces serve: If we are to properly modernize our Armed Forces, we must also bring our personnel policies up to date. The AF must represent the society they defend, They should not become isolated from it.

In the post-Cold War era, a good soldier’s main strength is his professional competence and not his physical strength. This changing nature of warfare can also could also explain women’s increasing military participation.

4. Concrete case of Estonia

After regaining the independence in 1991, the Estonian political authorities decided to base the Estonian MoD on ‘civilianised’ principles. This ‘civilianisation’ of the defence ministry formed part of a larger campaign of de-Sovietization of state structures, which started after the parliamentary elections of 1992 when a coalition of centre-right parties won with a slogan of ‘Clean the house!’ It meant that the government coalition would target its policies towards a restructuring of governmental agencies. All ministries recruited new personnel in order to free themselves from the network of Soviet relationships and Soviet inertia.

The personnel restructuring introduced a greater civilian component within the defence ministry. This meant the installing of civilian defence ministers as well as a cadre of civilian administrators to run defence affairs. The ‘civilianisation’ of defence sector meant increasing the proportion of civilian employees and, in particular, placing civilians in key policymaking positions.

The Soviet-era thinking of defence planning as a military matter became replaced with a new understanding that defence was the responsibility of the democratically elected government, more concretely, the responsibility of the civilian men and women within the MoD. Currently, the proportion of women employed in the MOD of Estonia makes up 52%. Out of these, 60% are between 21 and 30 years old, 25% are between 31 and 40. Merely 3 women out of 122 are older than 61. Judging by first impression, this is a success.

5. Problems in Estonia’s Civil-Military Relations

However, underneath a seemingly impeccable façade, Estonia still faces problems in civil-military relations, which includes the relations between people in suits and uniforms. The main sources of tension are to be found in the historic interpretation of the interwar period, as well as in the Soviet legacies. The challenges include overcoming the distrust of politicians by the military and increasing the military expertise among the civilian defence officials, that is among young little experienced civilian men and women in the Ministry of Defence.

Problems in Estonian civil-military relations that includes problematic relations between men and women mainly evolve around historic legacies. The particular interpretation of the Soviet occupation in 1939-1940 suggests that some high-level officers may distrust the politicians
and their capability to defend Estonia's independence. The distrust originates from a belief that the military saved the young Estonian republic in the War of Independence, while the politicians sold it out to the Soviet Union by signing the mutual assistance pact in 1939.

The Soviet legacy in the civil-military relations expressed itself in a counter-reaction to the Soviet-time militarised defence sector, the ‘civilianisation’ of the Ministry of Defence was implemented too strongly, accepting no officers within the ministry throughout 1990s. This swing of the pendulum to the other extreme resulted in a lack of military expertise and made the military feel that they ‘fell prey’ to incompetent defence officials. Interpretation of historic events informs our understanding of current issues, the more so as we are sometimes unaware of it. It is, therefore, pivotal that whenever history is used in the debates on current affairs, a balanced and neutral stance is observed. While never fully achievable, this will at least help us avoid some errors of the past.

There is no reason to believe that these problems are in any way particular to Estonia, to the exclusion of other post-Soviet Eastern and Central European countries. Estonia has been newly independent for over a dozen years, yet the transformation of civil-military relations to democratic norms still proceeds with difficulties. This allows us to assume that building a democratic control in post-Soviet countries, even if accepted as members to ‘respectable clubs’ like EU or NATO, is a much bigger and more difficult challenge than is generally recognised.

6. Conclusion
The break-up of the Soviet system increased the role of women in defence policy. However, the change has not happened without difficulties. Estonia’s accession to the international political and security organisations such as NATO and EU would lead us to assume that Estonia has created an effective system of democratic control of the military. But problems still exist within the civilian control of the military in post-Soviet Estonia.