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THE WAYS DIVERSITY AND GENDER AFFECT MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM AND HOW DIVERSE GROUPS PERCEIVE THIS CONCEPT

Abstract. *Not much research has looked at how diversity and gender affect military professionalism and diverse groups perceive this concept. Using a qualitative approach, the study examined perspectives on military professionalism and unprofessionalism among diverse members of the Albanian Armed Forces (AAF). To ensure a diversity of participants, the study was based on the constructivist paradigm (multiple realities) as well as the Gender Perspective in the Albanian Armed Forces report (2013), which helps identify the varying impacts of such research on diverse groups of men and women. A total of 150 individuals participated in interviews and focus groups between October 2022 and August 2023. The findings show that professionalism and unprofessionalism each have distinct characteristics, where leadership is a key factor. This study sheds light on the members' experiences and how the latter affect the way in which professionals are perceived.*
Keywords: *Albanian Armed Forces, Military Professionalism, Qualitative Research, Diversity*

Introduction

The *Long-Term Plan for the Development of the Albanian Armed Forces 2016–2025* (2015) ("the Plan") is a guiding document created by the Albanian Forces leadership under the auspices of the Parliament of Albania. The Plan has defined professionalism in the Albanian Armed Forces (AAF) for almost a decade. The concept of placing others ahead of oneself, the lawful and proper use of military force, and acceptance of unlimited accountability are what distinguish military professionalism. Its members have accumulated an organised and specialised body of military knowledge

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and talents via education, training and experience, which they utilise competently and impartially while carrying out their objectives. Military professionals in Albania adhere to a shared set of core beliefs and ideals known as the military ethos, which guides them in their tasks and allows them to maintain a special relationship of trust with Albanian society (Long-Term Plan for the Development of the Albanian Armed Forces 2016–2025, 2015). Military professionals in Albania follow a common set of basic values and principles found in the military ethos (On some changes and additions to Law no. 59/2014 for the Military Career in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Albania, 2021). These principles direct the performance of their duties and enable them to preserve a unique bond of trust with the Albanian population. Traditional military concepts like unlimited liability, fighting spirit, discipline and teamwork are woven into Albanian military values such as duty, loyalty, integrity, courage, and the warrior's honour, along with the traditional touchstones in Huntington's (1957) and Janowitz's (1960) definitions of professionalism – specialised knowledge, responsibility, competence, and the nature of civil–military relations (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960). Various levels of responsibility (organisational and professional etc.) and categories of competency (core, supporting, specialised and common knowledge etc.) are also outlined (Long-Term Plan for the Development of the Albanian Armed Forces 2016–2025, 2015). The Plan sets out the leadership, professional development policies, history, heritage and traditions, as well as the crucial responsibilities these ideas play in upholding the armed forces profession. This profession must remain relevant (i.e., meet the needs of Albanians), open (i.e., knowledge and relevant skills are available), consistent (i.e., attributes of responsibility, expertise and identity are consistent) and provide reciprocity (i.e., expectations and obligations between Albanian society and the profession, and vice versa). The Plan also recognises that the surrounding culture and values shape military professionalism. Such professionalism has been developed over time by conceptual and cultural factors. On the conceptual level, notions of military professionalism have evolved since Huntington (1957) and Janowitz (1960) following changes in both society and the function of the military (Snider and Matthews, 2005). Researchers have sought to comprehend the impact on the societal, organisational and human levels, including a shift from a more traditional perspective on the military (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960; Sarkesian, 1981) to one formed by the external environment (Evetts, 2003). On the cultural front, in 2013 the Government of Albania issued the *Gender Perspective in the Albanian Armed Forces* report (2013) ("the Report") that described the current state of women's involvement in the Albanian Armed Forces (Gender Perspective in the Albanian Armed Forces, 2013; Baka et al., 2011). The Report calls for institutionalised culture change that is more

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inclusive of gender and diversity. Although significant research has been conducted on the military as a profession (Snider, 2005) and the military's efforts to boost diversity, few researchers have investigated the diverse perspectives of members themselves with respect to the concept of military professionalism and how diversity fits into it. The purpose of this project was thus to examine views on military professionalism held by various AAF members using a qualitative technique influenced by the Report (Gender Perspective in the Albanian Armed Forces, 2013). The Report (2013) questions assumptions made about shared experiences among a range of men and women to better comprehend the diverse viewpoints and experiences in the Albanian military to do with the concept of military professionalism.

Theories of military professionalism

As stated above, numerous frameworks of military professionalism, notably those of Huntington (1957), Janowitz (1960) and Sarkesian (1981), have long dominated the literature. Other models such as those developed by Moskos (1997), Abbott (1988) and Nuciari (1994) have focused on comparative analysis and evolution in military professionalism. With a focus on the officer corps, Huntington (1957) described professionalism as "a peculiar type of functional group with highly specialized characteristics" (Huntington, 1957: 7), with expertise, responsibility and corporateness composing professionalism. Expertise refers to military personnel's specific talents, as well as the education and training required to develop such skills. Huntington (1957) followed Harold Lasswell (1941) in characterising the specific expertise of military professionals as the "management of violence", implying that the military's primary role is to plan and direct combat operations as well as organise, equip and train the force that is to carry them out. Responsibility relates to the officer corps' societal obligation, which gives rise to civil–military relations: the officer corps is granted a professional monopoly in exchange for delivering a service "essential to the functioning of society" (Huntington, 1957: 9). Finally, corporateness, in Huntington's definition, signifies a shared sense of unity among officers within a hierarchical structure that includes non-professionals like non-combat officers and reservists. Later scholars criticised the Huntingtonian approach for dismissing non-combat officer specialities as unprofessional (Huntington, 1957). Moreover, given the era, Huntington's (1957) framework examined male officers exclusively and their experience as individual professionals (Huntington, 1957). Janowitz (1960) was likewise concerned with the officer corps and its transition to a profession, describing military professionalism as expertise through skill and performance, responsibility, group identity and cohesion, and education and training. He also viewed

the military's future as being preoccupied with challenges that military leaders must confront, such as the impact of improvements in technology and the social environment. While Janowitz (1960) is more inclusive of external effects on the military (e.g., societal forces), like Huntington (1957), he focuses on a male officer corps (Huntington, 1957). Following Lasswell (1941), (Sarkesian, 1981) who defined the purpose of the military profession as the "management of violence" situates the military profession within the broader political and societal environment, alongside the institutional perspective (e.g., military–civilian relations) and the individual perspective (i.e., as shaped by institutional socialisation). Sarkesian (1981) defines professionalism as "honesty, integrity, loyalty, honour, and gentlemanly conduct" (Sarkesian, 1981: 11). Military professionalism includes civilian command, dignity and worth, justice, unique knowledge and competency, legitimacy, collective identity, and professional ethos. Professionalism fails when personal ideals, institutional requirements, and community perspectives clash (Sakresian, 1981). Sarkesian's (1981) paradigm, like those of Huntington (1957) and Janowitz (1960), concentrates on the officer corps, with a broader focus given to the intersections between the individual, the institution, and social issues (Sarkesian, 1981). Moskos' (1977) Institutional/Occupational (I/O) model applies to all types of military personnel, not simply officers. Unlike previous frameworks, his model seeks to explain the military's shift from a professional to an institutional and occupational force. Institutional components include service to country (legitimacy), proximity of job and residence (residence), and a major commitment to the organisation (role commitment). A marketplace economy (legitimacy), the separation of employment from the location of a member's home (residence), and a secondary commitment to the organisation (role commitment) are examples of occupational elements. In actuality, the military contains both parts (Moskos, 1977). Cafforio (1988) proposed the Bureaucratisation/Professionalisation (B/P) model, which shows how components of both are present in the officer corps to measure processes of change within the profession, based on the I/O model. Central to this model are elements like "the objective of officers' actions, courses of action, dominant ethical norms, primary sources guiding their thought processes, desired forms of gratification, socio-cultural influences, and reference groups" (Moskos, 1977: 64). According to Nuciari (1994), "all scholars dealing with the military profession agree on one peculiarity: it is simultaneously a bureaucracy and a profession" (Nuciari, 1994: 15). Abbot (1988) defined military professionalism as an "exclusive occupational group applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases" (Abbot, 1988: 8) and as including work, jurisdiction and competition. Knowledge and abilities are controlled by occupational groups, and abstraction separates professionals from non-professionals.

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Work refers to the tasks performed within a profession as well as the people who perform them. Further, activities have subjective qualities (e.g., diagnosis and therapy) as well as objective qualities (e.g., technological implications). The power and reputation of the profession's academic understanding are critical for its continued jurisdiction. Accordingly, "diagnosis, treatment, inference, and academic work provide the cultural machinery of jurisdiction" (Abbot, 1988: 59).

Methods and participants

To capture experiences from a diverse range of participants, the research was developed using a constructivist paradigm, which emphasises the inclusion of many social realities experienced by participants (Creswell, 2007; Morse, 2015), and the *Gender Perspective in the Albanian Armed Forces* report (2013). This paradigm explores how racial, cultural, ethnic and gender identities are incorporated into the military institution, which has in place extensive socialisation processes to foster a sense of shared identity. To ensure diverse participation, members of the Albanian Armed Forces were invited to participate via a parallel subgroup (Guest et al., 2006) and the snowball sampling technique (Mason, 1996). Participants were chosen from a variety of demographic groupings encompassing age, gender, military rank, geographic area, and varied identities, including ethnic minorities. Participants in occupations with a low representation of men (medics, nurses, lawyers) or women (women in combat weaponry) were sought. Potential participants were invited by email to in-person interviews or focus groups throughout Albania and a phone interview at their leisure. All information was gathered between October 2022 and August 2023. The duration of the interviews and focus groups, which included the administration of a consent form, semi-structured conversation using the interview and focus group procedures, and debriefing addressing follow-up contact should they have any additional questions, ranged between 30 and 90 minutes. While all the data were combined for the data analysis, some focus groups either had men or only women in them.

As shown in Table 1, the final participant pool comprised 150 individuals affiliated with the AAF, representing all three branches (Army, Air Force, Navy), including both active-duty and reserve components. These participants spanned age groups ranging from 18 to 60, encompassing various ranks from OR2 (junior NCOs) to OF5 (senior officers), and both male and female members. The sample also contained a diverse range of communities, with a mix of majorities and minorities, and was drawn from different geographical regions. While efforts were made to integrate varied views, there are limitations on understanding the intersectionality of these

perspectives (in the context of a minority of women). Since the purpose of the research was to investigate military professionalism among various AAF members, several questions were designed to elicit their opinions on professionalism:
1. Is serving in the military considered to be a profession?
2. Which features point to military professionalism?
3. Which features point to military unprofessionalism?

After the interviews and focus groups were completed, the data were coded using the protocol questions, followed by a deeper investigation of themes and patterns in the data (Miles et al., 2014). NVivo (2015) was used to arrange the data and present bigger themes, Microsoft OneNote to summarise and articulate the themes, and Microsoft Excel to create a summary matrix of all the themes found.

Results

This section presents the major themes concerning professionalism and unprofessionalism the participants identified.

Professionalism

When asked about the characteristics of professionalism in general and whether the Albanian military was considered to be a profession, 95% of the participants declared that it is, while the remaining 5% viewed it more as a job than a career. This minority perspective did not significantly alter the overall perception of Albanian military personnel regarding military professionalism. The military's significance within Albanian society, on the other hand, was generally mentioned by those who believed it that it is a profession. When probed about the characteristics of professionalism in the military, participants declared that having their peers' support, being able to trust that they will get the task done, and having the Albanian public's confidence in their efforts and strategy are all key components of military professionalism. Many participants compared professionalism to the military's mission and the reasons people join, saying that professionals realise the risks involved, demonstrate a readiness to serve and, above all else, the military is different from other professions.

The main themes regarding professionalism in the AAF that emerged are: (1) allegiance and corporateness; (2) education, training, and professional development; (3) military discipline and code of conduct; (4) personal qualities and competencies (positive); (5) diversity and inclusion; and (6) social norms and public perception.

Allegiance and corporateness. Several participants stated that being professional entails allegiance to one's country as being as a cornerstone of military professionalism, exemplifying the unwavering commitment and profound sense of duty held by soldiers. Rooted in a deep love for their nation, military professionals dedicate themselves to safeguarding its sovereignty, security and values. This allegiance transcends personal interests, reflecting a selfless willingness to place the needs of the country above all else. Through sacrifice, discipline and unwavering resolve, these individuals uphold the honour of their nation, responding to the call of duty with an unyielding dedication as embodying the essence of military professionalism. Other participants mentioned teamwork and feeling connected to those around you, "To me, professionalism means building a team, being loyal to your superiors above within the limits of the law, and showing loyalty downwards to your subordinates" (Interviewee 1). Another participant stated, "We all learn about each other, and then we have this symbiotic work relationship that we all understand and do" (Interviewee 2).

Education, training, and professional development. Professionalism was defined as a competency in one's occupation and a continuing desire to learn through training, education and professional growth. One participant stated, "I think professionalism is based on education" (Interviewee 3), whereas another noted, "We are a group of people who have to be highly skilled" (Interviewee 4). Given the level of skill needed for a variety of AAF positions, several participants believed that maintaining and pursuing education, training, and professional development opportunities are critical parts of being a military professional.

Military discipline and code of conduct. The Ministry of Defence and the Albanian Armed Forces operate pursuant to the law on Military Discipline in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Albania (2014), which establishes a standard of conduct for AAF personnel. The law and its purpose were acknowledged as important characteristics of professionalism by the participants. According to one participant, "To be a professional, in general, means that you have a culture and understanding of what is right and wrong and how to do things to succeed" (Interviewee 5). Professionalism meant adherence to military and societal standards (Law on the status of the armed forces of the Republic of Albania, 2004). As one participant put it, "It also means acting ethically in terms of not taking advantage of people, either in the chain of command, those who are above, or those below you" (Interviewee 6).

Personal qualities and competencies (positive). Several individuals mentioned a range of skills and personality traits that are crucial to being a professional, including discipline, respect, loyalty, altruism and honesty. A significant number of participants believed that self-control and discipline are essential components of military professionalism: "I'd say a high degree of discipline

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and self-control makes one a professional" (Interviewee 7). One participant stated, "I would suggest that a professional treats every human being the same regardless of their culture, or where or how they identify" (Interviewee 8).

Social norms and public perception. Several participants argued that professionalism is influenced by broader social norms and one's public image. The military must be professional because not only are they projecting a sense of professionalism out to the civilian population who are looking at us every day ... it's something the country can use to be proud of their military as an institution (Law on the Powers and Authorities of Management of the Armed Forces Command of the Republic of Albania, 2014). Another criterion was accountability to the public, "We're accountable to the public, there's that expectation of accountability" (Interviewee 12). As a final point, some individuals believed that professionalism includes one's personal life, where one's activities either positively or negatively reflect on one's professionalism. A participant (Interviewee 12), stated:

> *I believe it ought to be accepted outside of the workplace as well. You are constantly in the spotlight. When you swear allegiance to your country, you do so for the duration of your life, not just for 8 hours a day.*

Diversity and inclusion. Ethnic-, cultural- and gender-based diversity can significantly enhance military professionalism in numerous ways. Diverse teams bring a range of perspectives to problem-solving, in turn fostering innovation and creative solutions. Cultural sensitivity is vital for international operations, and diverse personnel are better equipped to navigate cultural nuances. Inclusive leadership promotes equitable decision-making and boosts morale and cohesion. Embracing diversity also expands talent recruitment and retention efforts, contributing to a more effective, adaptable and ethical military force overall. One participant (Interviewee 16), stated:

> *Women bring diverse perspectives and life experiences to the table, enhancing the understanding of complex issues and revealing alternative solutions. In diverse teams, including women, collaboration flourishes, fostering creativity and innovation. Women often possess higher emotional intelligence, which aids in conflict management, inclusive leadership, and considering well-being in decision-making.*

Unprofessionalism

Out of the 150 participants, 90% believed that several features of unprofessionalism exist in the military, yet also recognised that these features are

not exclusive to the military. The remaining 10% declared that the features of unprofessionalism in the military have evolved over time and are difficult to define clearly. The following themes arose among individuals who identified elements of unprofessionalism: (1) a lack of respect and discipline; (2) alcohol abuse; (3) toxic leadership; (4) personal qualities (negative); (5) stereotypes; (6) double standards; and (7) discrimination.

Lack of respect and discipline. Disrespectful behaviour to one's peers, subordinates or superiors undermines the principles of mutual respect and dignity that are important in a professional military environment. Disregarding military rank and authority can hold profound implications for the chain of command and overall military discipline. Disrespecting the authority of higher-ranking officers or non-commissioned officers undermines the established structure, eroding the foundation of order and obedience that is essential for effective operations. In addition, the consequences extend beyond immediate implications, potentially causing a ripple effect that affects the morale and cooperation of the entire unit. Recognising and upholding the hierarchical structure of the military is paramount for maintaining a functional and cohesive armed force.

Alcohol abuse. Alcohol laws in the military have changed over the years (Draft Law of the Ministry of Defence "On some additions and changes to Law no. 173/2014 "On Discipline in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Albania", 2021), and several participants acknowledged the influence of unprofessionalism. One participant said that when a ritual incorporates drinking, "unprofessional behaviour can follow" (Interviewee 19). Although drinking still formed part of mess life, several participants believed there had been a considerable shift in the way alcohol is used in the military.

Toxic leadership. Leaders who mistreat their subordinates, create a hostile work environment, or prioritise personal gain over the well-being of their team exhibit toxic leadership, which goes against professional standards. One participant (Interviewee 21), stated:

> *Working under dysfunctional leadership is not only demoralising. It can also have an impact on the overall performance of a team. Because toxic leaders prioritise their interests, their actions jeopardise the well-being of their teams.*

Personal qualities (negative). Several participants believed that the way people present themselves and specific personal traits of new members can impact professionalism. One participant noted, "There are certain personality traits you want in this organisation... However, several of the politically correct ideas that we observe appear to conflict with a person's highly positive traits" (Interviewee 22). Another feature mentioned by participants was

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being self-serving. "Most people are there for themselves", one participant observed, adding "Either they will try to take all the credit to look good and get promoted" (Interviewee 24).

Stereotypes. Gender stereotypes, in particular, can shape people's perceptions of military professionals. The military has traditionally been viewed as a male-dominated institution, leading to stereotypes about what a 'typical' soldier/officer looks like. These stereotypes can affect how individuals evaluate the professionalism of service members of different genders. One participant (Interviewee 25), stated:

> *When gender-based stereotypes are prevalent, there can be lower expectations for women in terms of physical fitness and combat performance. This can result in women being underestimated or not given the same opportunities to excel in combat roles, despite their capabilities.*

Double standards. Gender-based double standards in military are common and stem from entrenched gender stereotypes. Examples include differing physical standards, higher expectations for women in leadership roles, scrutiny of female service members' appearance, biases regarding emotional expression, differing perceptions of language and behaviour, career progression obstacles for women, and harsher criticism of mistakes. These double standards vary by military culture and policies. One participant (Interviewee 26), stated:

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> *While evaluating leadership potential and performance, double standards may arise. Men may receive more favourable evaluations for displaying traits associated with stereotypical masculinity, even if their actual leadership abilities are not superior to their female counterparts. This can lead to a lack of recognition for the leadership skills of female service members.*

Discrimination. Gender- and cultural-based discrimination, including sexual harassment and bias, can impact how military professionals are perceived. Experiences of discrimination or harassment can affect a person's career trajectory and may lead to negative perceptions of professionalism. One participant (Interviewee 27), stated:

> *Discrimination can result in women or ethnic minorities being passed over for promotions and career advancement opportunities in favour of their white male counterparts, even when they are equally or more qualified. This can create a perception of unfairness and hinder the development of a professional and merit-based military culture.*

Leadership

Leaders were seen as essential to the professionalism or unprofessionalism of their subordinates. Participants believed that people who wanted to be role models needed to assist both their chain of command and their subordinates. The relationship between leaders and professionalism was best summed up by one participant as follows: "Leading from the top and setting those standards and achieving them yourself...: 'A professional can't hold anyone else to a standard if they're not willing to do it themselves'" (Interviewee 30). Another noted, "There has to be an active interest on the part of leaders to develop and mentor those who are coming after them" (Interviewee 31). Those who highlighted unprofessional features of leadership referred to specific leadership styles and organisational practices. One participant stated, "When unprofessional behaviour happens, leaders must engage themselves on all levels, echoing the approach to unprofessional behaviour" (Interviewee 32). Some interviewees believed that a lack of clear organisational messaging and consistent responses to unprofessional behaviour had harmed military professionalism as well. As regards how to handle unprofessional behaviour, another participant said, "But you don't get fired, even if you don't show up for work, even if you do something bad, the punishment is so ridiculous – you get promoted anyway" (Interviewee 34).

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Discussion

This qualitative study investigated the views held by various AAF members on military professionalism and unprofessionalism. This section explores the primary characteristics that emerged and how they compare with the notion of military professionalism defined in the *Long-Term Plan for the Development of the Albanian Armed Forces 2016–2025* (2015). In the Plan, the relationship between professionalism and leadership is mirrored, with leadership being critical for maintaining the profession. Leadership is also in charge of developing a culture that is inclusive of gender and diversity and is ultimately accountable for presenting, understanding and practising professionalism for the participants. Given the significance of leadership in regulating military professionalism, issues arise when that leadership is toxic (Padilla et al., 2007; Lipman, 2005), ineffective (Lipman, 2005; Bass, 1985) or perceived to be narcissistic (Lipman, 2005; Mackey et al., 2021). This can be a problem when there are ethical lapses that call for leadership involvement. Toxic leadership can be mitigated by leadership performance that considers subordinate input (Padilla et al., 2007), advisory panels (Bass, 1985) and a stronger emphasis on the traits of good leadership (Lipman,

2005). The AAF leadership model defines leadership as "directing, motivating, and enabling others to accomplish the mission, professionally and ethically, while developing or improving capabilities that contribute to mission success" (Long-term Plan of the Development of the Albanian Armed Forces 2016–2025, 2015; Decision of Council of Ministers for the approval of the Sectoral Strategy of the Ministry of Defence 2007–2013, 2007). Finally, cohesiveness is a key feature of group performance and mission accomplishment; a leader's effectiveness influences how members collaborate (Segal et al., 2015). As mentioned above, the key characteristics of professionalism include maintaining and pursuing training, educational and professional development opportunities. Although group cohesion was seen as being critical to performance, research has shown that task cohesion, not group cohesion, is more crucial for success (Mullen and Copper, 1994; Matthews, 2002; Segal et al., 2015). In other words, group cohesion is less important than the competency of the group members working toward a common goal, which holds consequences for diversity. Leaders who focus on tasks and practise respecting and caring for others produce more successful teams (Matthews, 2002; Segal et al., 2015). The participants agreed that adhering to a code of conduct, rules and societal standards, while also maintaining a professional public image are important aspects of professionalism. These features depend on clear and concise policies, as well as how members are socialised into them (Sion, 2006). This emphasises the significance of inclusive policies and leadership sticking to and ensuring consistent implementation of these policies. People are a vital aspect of the military, as expressed in Albanian's latest defence and human resources management policy (Human resources management strategy 2020–2024, 2020).

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As pointed out in the *Long-Term Plan for the Development of the Albanian Armed Forces 2016–2025* (2015), participants considered: (1) allegiance and corporateness; (2) education; training, and professional development; (3) military discipline and code of conduct; (4) personal qualities and competencies (positive); (5) diversity and inclusion; and (6) social norms and public perception as the main themes of military professionalism.

When asked how they would rank such themes based on their importance and level of impact in shaping their perception of military professionalism, 98% of the interviewees considered allegiance and corporateness as the central theme; military professionalism, education, training and professionalism as the second-most important characteristic; military discipline and code of conduct as the third-most; diversity and inclusion as the fourth-most; social norms and public perception as the fifth-most, and positive personal qualities and competencies as the sixth-most important characteristics. The remaining 2% of interviewees proposed a slightly different ranking

which, in principle, does not significantly alter the general perception of Albanian military personnel concerning military professionalism.

The interviewees' answers indicate a high level of agreement within the AAF regarding on constitutes military professionalism and its primary themes. The fact the majority of focus groups participants (95%–98%) ranked each theme consistently indicates a strong consensus among the surveyed group. This suggests these themes are seen as highly important and that there is little variation in their perceived importance among the interviewees, where allegiance and corporateness is considered the most important characteristic by 98% of them. This shows that loyalty to the military institution and a sense of unity within the military community are overwhelmingly valued. Education, training and professionalism are ranked as the second-most important theme by 98% of interviewees, in turn highlighting the significance of continuous learning, skill development, and adherence to professional standards. The high ranking of military discipline and the code of conduct as the third-most important characteristic (97%) underscores the importance of adhering to ethical and behavioural standards within the military. While slightly lower in ranking than the previous themes, the fact that 96% of interviewees still considered diversity and inclusion as the fourth-most important theme reveals there is recognition within the military community of the importance of these values, albeit it may not be as universally emphasised as the top three themes. Social norms and public perception, along with positive personal qualities and competencies, are considered the fifth-most important theme by 98% of interviewees. The remaining 2%–4% of interviewees proposed a slightly different ranking which, in principle, does not significantly alter the general perception of Albanian military personnel about military (un)professionalism. While these characteristics are still highly regarded, they are not ranked as prominently as the top four themes. To further promote the desired themes within the military, including allegiance and corporateness, education, training, professional development, military discipline, positive personal qualities, diversity and inclusion, and a positive public perception, military leadership can implement various strategies. These strategies encompass reinforcing the mission and values, fostering camaraderie through team-building, investing in high-quality training and mentorship programmes, consistently enforcing discipline and codes of conduct, cultivating positive personal qualities and competencies, ensuring equal opportunities and diversity training, engaging with the community to shape public perception, and maintaining transparency and media relations. Encouraging continuous learning, feedback mechanisms, and accountability while conducting periodic assessments is the key to fostering a culture of professionalism, unity and positive public perception within the military organisation.

Alongside the themes of professionalism, themes of unprofessionalism were examined. Unprofessionalism was attributed to: (1) a lack of respect and discipline (disrespectful behaviour towards peers and subordinates); (2) alcohol abuse (at events or during customs and traditions); (3) toxic leadership (creation of a hostile working environment); (4) personal qualities (negative: individualistic versus collectivist features); (5) stereotypes; (6) double standards; and (7) discrimination.

When asked to rank the themes of military unprofessionalism and based on their importance and impact on shaping perceptions, three groups of interviewees gave the following rankings:

Group 1 (comprising 58% of all interviewees) ranked them as: (1) a lack of respect and discipline; (2) stereotypes; (3) double standards; (4) discrimination; (5) toxic leadership; (6) alcohol abuse; and (7) negative personal qualities.

Group 2 (22% of interviewees) ranked them as: (1) stereotypes; (2) double standards; (3) discrimination; (4) toxic leadership; (5) a lack of respect and discipline; (6) negative personal qualities; and (7) alcohol abuse.

Group 3 (20% of interviewees) ranked them as: (1) stereotypes; (2) double standards; (3) discrimination; (4) a lack of respect and discipline; (5) alcohol abuse; (6) toxic leadership; and (7) negative personal qualities.

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The research findings reveal a significant diversity of opinions among the interviewees regarding the ranking of themes concerning military unprofessionalism. Various interviewee groups prioritise these characteristics differently, indicating a lack of agreement on what is most important in shaping perceptions of military un/professionalism. Despite these variations, some common characteristics emerge. Stereotypes, double standards, and discrimination consistently rank among the top concerns for all interviewee groups, which means that addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing professionalism in the military. In addition, the research highlights varying perceptions of professionalism among the interviewee groups. For instance, Group 1 places stronger emphasis on issues related to respect and discipline, while Group 2 is more focused on concerns related to hostile work environments created by toxic leadership. Notably, Group 3 appears to prioritise gender-related issues and leadership positions, suggesting a specific concern with gender disparities within the military's leadership hierarchy.

These findings hold significant policy and training implications for military organisations. Improving professionalism may require a wide range of issues to be addressed, yet it is also essential to tailor interventions to address the specific concerns raised by the different interviewee groups.

Overall, the research shows the complexity of perceptions of military un/professionalism within the military and stresses the important need

to understand and address the unique concerns and priorities of diverse segments within the military. Military leadership can effectively mitigate unprofessional themes in the military by implementing customised strategies. These strategies include leading by example, enforcing standards, providing diversity and inclusion education, ensuring consistency, fostering accountability, addressing toxic leadership via training and intervention, promoting responsible alcohol consumption, nurturing collectivist values, and actively promoting equal opportunities for leadership roles. By emphasising communication and accountability while conducting regular cultural assessments, military leadership can create a culture of professionalism, respect and inclusivity, in turn mitigating unprofessional behaviours within the organisation.

Findings of the research align with the conclusions drawn by Brožič and Pešec (2017) in *Teorija in Praksa*, Brown et al. (2020) in *Military Psychology*, and Vuk and Galiči (2022) in *Teorija in Praksa*. These studies point out the significance of equal treatment, and respect for the dignity and integrity of individuals in the workplace, which can have a profound impact on interest in the military profession and the retention of military personnel. Further, they highlight how workplace commanders or superiors can add significantly to the military culture and collective tolerance through their leadership.

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Important considerations and limitations

While evaluating the results presented in this study, it is vital to consider several factors and limitations, particularly those stemming from external influences. For example, the release of news regarding the involvement of Albanian Air Force pilots in drug trafficking (Bushati et al., 2015; Ora News, 2015)[1] or the news about cannabis being cultivated in the Zall Herr military barracks (Isa, 2023)[2] may have influenced the participants' responses. Another factor that should be taken into account is the research methodology, which was influenced by the gender perspective within the Albanian Armed Forces (Gender Perspective in the Albanian Armed Forces, 2013) to ensure a diversity of participants. A third significant factor tied to the inclusion of a variety of individuals is the sampling process, which aimed

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[1] *On 29 January 2015, a helicopter carrying nearly 1 tonne of drugs from Morocco to Spain crashed into a high-voltage pole on the outskirts of Malaga, Spain. This incident occurred during a pursuit by the Spanish Civil Guard. The helicopter was being piloted by Major Sokol Feka, an active-duty pilot of the Albanian Armed Forces. Major Feka served as an instructor at an Albanian Air Force base.*

[2] *During a police operation, 125 cannabis plants being cultivated at the Zall Herr military barracks were discovered, resulting in the arrest of 13 service members of different ranks in connection with the case.*

to gather feedback from specific groups (males and females of Roma communities – the least represented minority). However, there are certain constraints in terms of the applicability of the findings to the entire AAF population, as well as the representativeness of the experiences of both men and women. Despite efforts to include a range of AAF members through the sampling method, only binary information regarding gender was collected. As a result, other gender identities could not be incorporated into the sampling technique, which is equally important for understanding a multitude of perspectives. Moreover, the study was unable to address intersectionality and its influence on opinions concerning military careers, professional identities, and experiences. Future studies should therefore explore how different gender identities and their intersections are affected by role models in the professional realm. In fact, the primary objective of a qualitative study is to provide insights into the experiences of a subset of AAF members, which can subsequently shape future research inquiries. It is worth noting that military professionalism has been subject to numerous studies in the past five decades, and its definition has evolved considerably. While the findings cannot be extrapolated to encompass the entire AAF community, they do indicate that opinions and experiences of AAF personnel align with the conventional definition of military professionalism. Notably, leadership is considered one of the most pivotal factors in cultivating a diverse culture within the military. It has the potential to influence both professional and unprofessional behaviours alike.

Conclusion

This research focussed on exploring the diverse viewpoints of AAF members and their perceptions of professionalism and unprofessionalism. Employing a qualitative approach that incorporates the gender perspective outlined in the 2013 report of the Albanian Armed Forces (Gender Perspective in the Albanian Armed Forces, 2013), the study involved interviews and focus groups conducted throughout Albania. The role of leadership in conveying, comprehending and practising professional behaviour emerged as a critical factor.

The research sheds light on several aspects of military professionalism and unprofessionalism, containing important considerations and pointing to future research in the field of military professionalism. Further research can help in gaining a deeper comprehension of how diversity contributes to, and to what extent different perspectives become integrated within, the traditional frameworks of military professionalism.

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