

# Place of the SNU in the education of citizens

Reflection circle G2S - n° 21

GCA (2S) Alain BOUQUIN

Published on 09/03/2018

L'Armée de Terre dans la société

**Shen questioning the scope of the universal national service (UNS), it is above all a question of its deep purpose and the adequacy of its implementation for this purpose: what are the answers it will have to provide to achieve the objectives that the policy will set for it?**

## **What purpose? Educational!**

When one reads the abundant documentation that has been produced on the subject of the UNS, one can see that the objectives pursued have been formulated in various ways, and have even evolved somewhat since the project was announced. But they do have a common thread. To try to sum up the desired final effect in a lapidary formula, one could say that it consists in "helping French youth to adhere to the fundamentals of our Nation".

It is therefore an educational goal that is very clearly assigned to the SNU. It can be broken down into various points, all of which are part of a civic construction to be completed and an "apprenticeship of France and its values" to be perfected :

to give collective meaning;

to instil life skills, behaviours and rules of life inspired by our republican values and democratic principles;

explain the rights and duties of the citizen;

to integrate (or reintegrate?) young people in need of guidance;

break the spiral of individualism, categorical interests and communitarianism that lead to the rejection of the other;

identify and deal with situations of school failure because they encourage marginalization;

to promote contacts between all strata of society and social mixing .

educate for individual and collective resilience ;

learn life-saving gestures...

We can obviously make an in-depth reading of this sudden craze for additional education: why is it so urgent? If the feeling of such a need is emerging in society and in the political class, it is because it responds to an identified gap that must be filled very quickly. The education of our youth has thus far been incomplete, or poorly received, or has not reached a whole generation? Others will answer these questions better. The fact is that the SNU is presented as a palliative, a tool for " recovery" or "repair" , a form of second chance device, which does not always help to enhance its value...

### **LCan the UNS respond to the educational challenges assigned to it? Yes, but only partially...**

Part of the SNU's vocation will thus be to provide additional education in an attempt to "catch up" with certain young people whose citizenship training needs to be completed or resumed. The project makes sense, of course, and its expectations are commendable. But there are many questions as to the real possibility of success.

The main criticisms in fact revolve around two key questions:

TroLate? Has a young adult not stopped being receptive? Wouldn't it be better to target younger boys and girls, still in school, in a more open-minded posture?

Trop short? Can we succeed in just one month in raising awareness and getting young people who have been learning "something else" for years to join? Even with the most generous arguments and the best pedagogy in the world, it is not possible in such a short period of time to bring about a profound change in behaviour and opinions?

This is how some sceptics believe that the SNU will not fulfil its educational purpose. For its effects too late and its duration too short will remain its weak points.

However, a more optimistic view is possible: without wishing to adorn the SNU with all the educational virtues, we are entitled to believe that it will be able to shake up habits, provoke questioning, provide, at least partially, answers or points of reference, and perhaps even offer meaning to young people who aspire to find it. Not as much as we would like to do... but always more than if we do nothing!

It is in this spirit that the idea of a phase of experimentation seems to impose itself: It should aim to measure in situ the reality, the scope, the depth, the solidity of the positive effects generated by the project, before taking an informed decision on whether or not to generalize it.

Experimentation will be all the more useful as other more material questions feed the scepticism of the project's opponents: too costly? too greedy in manpower?. Questions to which it will be necessary to provide answers in figures, which will have to be compared with those of the benefits provided.

Experimenting is in all cases one of the conditions for success: the programme to be followed and the objectives to be achieved must be constantly corrected and questioned in order to avoid rejection or overly passive behaviour. In order to be successful, the experience must be judged positively by a majority of those who will live it; otherwise it is those who tried to carry it out who will be blamed for its failure...

### **Education of the nation: what role for armies? In support!**

If the purpose and promises of the SNU are essentially educational, it is legitimate to wonder about the role to be played by armies whose mission is not to educate the nation.

The debate is not so simple. Education may be neither the vocation nor the primary destination of armies, but over time they have acquired a skill that they cannot deny. Without going so far as to say with Lyautey that the officer is "the educator of the entire nation", it must be admitted that the requirements of military training have led the armies to introduce a rather effective form of education. It is a real expertise that they cannot refuse to put at the service of the Nation, for a vast project of "enlarged national education".

There is a very subtle paradox that can be used by both opponents and supporters of the UN system project: if education is not a mission of armies, they should not participate in it; but since education is an expertise of armies, they should be stakeholders....

Armies also have a recognized status, a form of legitimacy that cannot be disregarded. For many of our fellow citizens, they remain in a way the "guardians of the values" of their country: a spirit of sacrifice in mind, but also devotion, discipline, self-sacrifice, surpassing oneself, a sense of service and commitment; the service of France remains central to them. They are a melting pot where all origins and all religions merge into a community united around the common good. How could they stay away from a project whose aim is precisely to make these values more alive among French youth?...

### **The UNS: the only modality for effective military participation? Towards a more global system, with complementary and/or alternative channels, under the aegis of the National Education system.**

It therefore seems certain that the SNU will be tested and that armies will take part in it. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the fact remains that the SNU will be far from providing all the answers expected. It is in fact a short-term solution to compensate for a lack of social ties and national cohesion. But it will probably not treat the root causes of the problem; it will content itself with relieving some of the visible wounds?

To go further, it is undoubtedly necessary to return to the fundamentals:

as far as the Nation is concerned, education is above all a mission of the ministry that

bears its name; armies are only a supporting force;

Education starts very early, and it's a long-term process.

So it will probably be necessary, in a second phase, once the SNU has (possibly?) For this, it will be necessary to set up (or rehabilitate) mechanisms that will make it possible to work in greater depth, over the long term, and further upstream, under the responsibility of national education, with the support of the armed forces.

What role can we expect the armed forces to play in this long-term undertaking? An effective and relevant contribution can take two essential forms:

the education of educators, which must aim to put the teaching profession in a position to train the youngest to a form of citizen awareness at the heart of which the spirit of defence has its place;

the education of the elite, which must make it possible to offer our most promising young people an experience and a basis in terms of cohesion and solidarity. The education of the elite, which should make it possible to offer our most promising young people an experience and a basis for national cohesion or leadership, before they themselves are led, in the public or private positions of responsibility that will be theirs, to restore these skills for the benefit of their fellow citizens.

Several concrete proposals or existing mechanisms deserve to be studied and/or strengthened to this end:

academic trinomas;

Defence education and teacher training;

an obligatory passage in the military environment for the young people of the grandes écoles who train the future executives of the Nation;

the strengthening of links between Defence and higher education .

These measures exist for many of them, others are to be invented, all are to be implemented with more vigour and conviction...

It is, in fact, a true " school-armed continuum ", such as it may have existed under the Third Republic, which should be restored in another form, with other, more modern tools. In such a scheme, the United Nations system would no longer necessarily have its place: as an instrument of catching up, it would cease to be necessary the day when the upstream instruments would fulfil their function...

Finally, the establishment of the United Nations system must be carried out with caution. In particular, existing forms of service such as adapted military service (SMA), voluntary military service (SMV), civic service or defence cadets should not be abandoned and hastily merged into a single system. For these schemes have proved their worth. They must be able to remain alternatives, or complementary structures, to the SNU. In a way, a multifaceted SNU could be set up, in which the old forms of services would constitute special modalities...

This caution is another reason which justifies the establishment of an experimental phase, if possible in comparative mode : We could usefully discover that a simple " expanded SMV ", likely to accommodate more underprivileged young French people, has all the assets to be a pragmatic substitute for the SNU, should the universality of the latter prove to be unfeasible and too costly...

**Finally, the UNS, beyond the work and studies relating to its usefulness, its cost or its methods of implementation, already has a merit: it is the catalyst for a much deeper reflection on our youth, their active participation in the life of the Nation and the path that should lead them to fully exercise this role. State action in this area is at present ill-adapted and ineffective: initiatives need to be taken. The United Nations system is one of them. It may give rise to doubts and often legitimate prejudices; it may, on the other hand, raise hopes, not all of which are well-founded; at the very least, it deserves to be tested. In any case, it is only a first step towards a much more comprehensive educational system that remains to be invented.**

---

**Title :** GCA (2S) Alain BOUQUIN

**Author (s) :** GCA (2S) Alain BOUQUIN

**Release date** 08/03/2018

---

[DOWNLOAD DOCUMENT](#)

---