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From National Security to Human Security: The Role of Military Social Work in Strengthening Individual and Institutional Resilience

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary transformations in the security environment have broadened the concept of security beyond its traditional state-centred dimension towards a perspective that places increasing emphasis on individuals and communities. Against this background, this article examines the role of military social work from a human security perspective and explores its relationship with individual, family, and institutional resilience. The study seeks to identify how social vulnerabilities affecting military personnel, veterans, and their families may extend beyond the individual sphere and, under certain conditions, affect the adaptive capacity and functioning of military institutions. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on an analysis of relevant academic literature and institutional documents in the fields of security and social protection. The article argues that military social work may function as a complementary mechanism supporting national security by helping to prevent and mitigate social vulnerabilities and by strengthening resilience within the military community. Integrating the social dimension into contemporary approaches to security thus enables a broader understanding of the relationship between individual protection, institutional functioning, and state resilience.

Keywords: human security; military social work; military community; resilience; national security; social vulnerability.

Introduction

The security of a state neither begins nor ends at its borders. Beyond military capability, territorial integrity, and the functioning of defence institutions, security also depends on individuals and

communities capable of responding, adapting, and maintaining their functioning in contexts of risk and uncertainty. Within the military system, this dimension is particularly relevant because institutional effectiveness ultimately depends upon a fundamentally human resource: the service member, their family, and, subsequently, the veteran returning to civilian life and the wider community.

The broadening of traditional approaches to security became particularly visible with the development of the concept of human security. The *Human Development Report 1994*, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), represented a major milestone in this shift by moving the focus beyond the protection of territory towards the protection of people and by linking security not only to defence but also to human development (UNDP, 1994). Subsequent developments in human security scholarship continued to emphasise the interconnected nature of vulnerabilities and the importance of approaches centred on individuals and communities (UNDP, 2014).

A people-centred orientation is also reflected in NATO's approach to human security. Through its *Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles*, adopted in 2022, the Alliance defines its approach as people-centred and oriented towards prevention and protection, with particular attention to individuals experiencing situations of vulnerability or marginalisation. NATO further emphasises that a more comprehensive understanding of the human environment can enhance operational effectiveness and contribute to lasting peace and security (NATO, 2022). Although NATO's human security agenda has a specific operational scope and does not directly encompass social work services for military personnel or veterans, the underlying principle of protecting individuals provides a relevant conceptual point of departure for examining the relationship between the well-being of the military community and institutional resilience.

Military social work can be situated within this conceptual space. Military personnel, veterans, and their families may experience vulnerabilities generated or intensified by the distinctive characteristics of military life, including family separation, occupational mobility, deployment, exposure to risk, injury, disability, bereavement, transition to civilian life, and reintegration difficulties. The specialised literature on military social work addresses such challenges across individual, family, and community levels (Rubin et al., 2013).

However, the social vulnerability of a service member or veteran should not automatically be equated with a national security vulnerability. The relationship becomes relevant through an

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intermediate mechanism: resilience. When individual or family vulnerabilities persist, accumulate, or impair adaptive capacity, their effects may extend beyond the strictly personal sphere. Conversely, preventing and mitigating such vulnerabilities through social work interventions may contribute to strengthening the adaptive capacities of individuals, families, and professional communities.

Against this background, the article addresses the following research question: To what extent, and through which mechanisms, can social work provided to military personnel, veterans, and their families be regarded as a complementary component of national security? The proposed hypothesis is that military social work contributes indirectly to national security by supporting human security and strengthening individual, family, and institutional resilience. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on the analysis of relevant academic literature and institutional documents, seeking to identify the conceptual point of convergence between security, social protection, and resilience.

1.1. From National Security to Human Security: Broadening the Object of Security

Traditionally, security has been associated primarily with the state, the protection of territory, and the capacity to defend against external threats. This perspective remains essential within an international system in which the use of force, strategic competition, and armed conflict continue to shape the security environment. Nevertheless, developments in security studies have highlighted the limitations of an exclusively political-military understanding of security. Buzan et al. (1998) contributed significantly to broadening this analytical framework by distinguishing five sectors of security—military, political, economic, societal, and environmental—and demonstrating that security-relevant vulnerabilities may emerge across different domains and interact with one another.

An even more pronounced shift in the level of analysis accompanied the development of the concept of human security. The *Human Development Report 1994*, published by the United Nations Development Programme, constituted a fundamental milestone by shifting attention from the security of territories towards the security of people. The report identified seven dimensions of human security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (UNDP, 1994). Through this approach, individuals and communities emerged as relevant referent objects of security without displacing the state from its fundamental role as a provider of security.

The expansion of the concept has, however, generated significant questions concerning its analytical boundaries. Paris (2001) warns that an excessively broad conception of human security risks encompassing virtually any threat to human well-being and, consequently, diminishing the

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concept's analytical precision. This criticism is particularly relevant to the present study: the existence of a social vulnerability does not automatically transform that vulnerability into a national security issue. It is therefore necessary to identify the mechanisms through which individual or community vulnerabilities may affect the adaptive capacity and functioning of broader social and institutional structures.

This distinction also highlights the need for empirical research assessing the actual effectiveness of existing support services alongside the experiences of their beneficiaries and within the relevant legislative and social policy frameworks. The present study does not undertake such an empirical assessment; rather, it seeks to establish a theoretical framework capable of supporting future research of this kind.

Subsequent developments strengthened the preventive dimension of human security. The *Human Security Now* report associated the concept with two complementary approaches; protection and empowerment; emphasising both the responsibility of institutions and the capacity of individuals to respond to situations of vulnerability (Commission on Human Security, 2003). The United Nations General Assembly subsequently conceptualised human security in terms of people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific, and prevention-oriented responses to widespread and cross-cutting challenges affecting people's survival, livelihoods, and dignity (United Nations General Assembly, 2012).

A people-centred perspective is also present in NATO's approach. Through the *Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles* adopted in 2022, the Alliance incorporates human security into its activities through an approach centred on prevention and protection (NATO, 2022). NATO's human security agenda focuses on specific areas—including the protection of civilians, conflict-related sexual violence, combating trafficking in human beings, children and armed conflict, and cultural property protection—and does not directly encompass military social work for service members or veterans. Nevertheless, the broader principle of protecting individuals offers a relevant conceptual framework for examining relationships among vulnerability, adaptive capacity, and resilience.

Human security should therefore not be understood as a substitute for state security but as a complementary perspective operating at a different level of analysis. The protection of individuals and the protection of institutions may become interdependent when human vulnerabilities affect the

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adaptive capacities of communities and organisations. Protecting individuals does not, therefore, necessarily compete with state security; under certain conditions, it may contribute to strengthening it. This relationship makes it possible to examine military social work not merely as an instrument of social protection, but also in terms of its potential contribution to individual, family, and institutional resilience.

1.2. Military Social Work as a Mechanism for Strengthening Resilience

The distinctive nature of the military profession creates a particular relationship between the individual, the family, and the institution. Occupational mobility, deployment, temporary separation from family, exposure to high-risk situations, injury, and transition to civilian life are experiences that may place considerable demands on individual and family adaptive resources. These circumstances do not inevitably result in vulnerability; however, they may create situations in which personal, family, or community resources become insufficient. Military social work operates within precisely this space, at the intersection between individual needs and the particular characteristics of the military environment.

The specialised literature describes military social work as a field extending beyond short-term intervention in situations of crisis. The *Handbook of Military Social Work* highlights the broad range of issues that military social workers may address, including behavioural health, trauma, disability, access to service systems, veterans' transition to civilian life, deployment cycles, family well-being, loss and bereavement, and the needs of children and couples within military families (Rubin et al., 2013). Consequently, the focus of intervention extends beyond the individual service member to encompass a wider network of relationships and resources that influence their capacity to adapt.

This perspective becomes particularly relevant when considered in relation to resilience. Within the military context, resilience should not be reduced to an individual's capacity simply to "withstand" pressure. It is more appropriately understood as a dynamic process of adaptation shaped by personal resources, family relationships, social support, and the institutional environment. Research on military families indicates that resilience is influenced by intrafamilial and contextual factors as well as by the interaction between families and the environments in which they function (Cramm et al., 2018). Vulnerability and resilience should therefore not be understood as fixed states;

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both may evolve in relation to available resources and the capacity of support systems to respond to emerging needs.

The family occupies a central position within this relationship. The effects of military life do not remain confined to the person serving within the military system, while repeated deployments and the consequences of injury may affect the entire family system. Saltzman et al. (2011), examining mechanisms of risk and resilience in military families, identify cascading processes through which stressors may affect family functioning. At the same time, they highlight the possibility of strengthening protective mechanisms, thereby supporting interventions directed not only towards the individual but towards the family as a system. Family functioning may also be relevant to the readiness and sustained effectiveness of military personnel, thereby linking family support to the broader question of organisational resilience.

From this perspective, social work may operate simultaneously across three levels. At the individual level, it may facilitate needs assessment, access to services and resources, and adaptation to significant changes in status or functioning. At the family level, interventions may support the management of separation, changes in family roles, access to community resources, and adaptation following deployment, injury, or transition to reserve status. At the community and institutional levels, military social work may facilitate connections between beneficiaries and civilian or military support systems, thereby reducing fragmentation in service provision.

Its role becomes particularly visible during the transition from military service to civilian life. Reintegration involves considerably more than a change of employment; it may require the reconstruction of daily routines, the redefinition of social and family roles, and the navigation of civilian service systems that differ from those encountered within the military environment. An exploratory study of recently discharged military veterans found that higher levels of resilience were associated with lower perceived difficulties in community reintegration (Castillo et al., 2019). Although these findings do not justify treating resilience as a universal explanation for successful reintegration, they indicate the relevance of adaptive resources during the transition process.

In Romania, recent scholarship in military social work has begun to focus specifically on these processes. Oprina (2026) examines post-deployment reintegration as a multidimensional process involving social, occupational, physical, and psychological challenges and highlights the role of the military social worker in connecting individuals and families with civilian and military institutions.

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Recent case-study research involving Romanian veterans likewise reflects an emerging interest in psychosocial resilience and post-military reintegration (Doca, 2026). These contributions provide a starting point for the development of a Romanian perspective on military social work, a field that remains in the process of conceptual and professional consolidation.

Viewed in this way, military social work does not automatically "produce" resilience, nor does it eliminate the risks associated with military service. Its contribution lies instead in mobilising and connecting the resources required for adaptation: identifying vulnerabilities, facilitating access to services, strengthening support networks, supporting families, and ensuring continuity of intervention during periods of transition. This preventive and adaptive function makes it possible to move beyond an exclusively reactive understanding of social work.

The proposed relationship can therefore be expressed as follows: vulnerability; intervention and access to resources; adaptive capacity; resilience.

At the individual and family levels, the intended outcome is the maintenance or restoration of social functioning. At the level of the military community, the accumulation of such adaptive capacities may contribute to collective stability and adaptation. Yet the movement from individual resilience towards the resilience of the structures of which individuals form part raises the central question addressed in the following section: under what conditions can individual vulnerability acquire institutional relevance and, consequently, become relevant to national security?

1.3. From Individual Vulnerability to Institutional Resilience

Individual vulnerability and institutional resilience should not be understood as isolated realities, but as distinct levels within the same social system. In the military environment, this relationship acquires particular significance: individuals function within families, military units, professional communities, and institutions, while their adaptive capacity is influenced by resources available at each of these levels. Resilience should therefore not be interpreted exclusively as a personal characteristic of the service member, but as a process shaped by the interaction between individuals and the organisational environments in which they operate.

Such an approach makes it possible to move beyond a perspective that places the entire responsibility for coping with adversity on the individual service member. A recent systematic review of resilience among active-duty military personnel identifies relevant factors at the individual (*micro*), organisational (*meso*), and broader structural (*macro*) levels, including leadership behaviour and

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organisational conditions. The authors nevertheless observe that existing research has focused predominantly on individual factors and argue for a more systemic perspective in which organisations themselves bear responsibility for facilitating access to resources, fostering belonging, and creating conditions conducive to resilience (Straub et al., 2026).

This distinction is particularly important for military social work. If resilience is understood exclusively as an individual's ability to "endure," vulnerability risks being interpreted as personal failure. A systemic perspective instead permits a different question: What resources does the institution make available to enable individuals to adapt? Access to services, social support, family functioning, organisational climate, and the ability to seek assistance without fear of stigma consequently become elements of the environment in which resilience may either be fostered or constrained.

The family constitutes one of the principal bridges between the individual and institutional levels. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019), in *Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society*, emphasises the importance of military family well-being, readiness, and resilience to the mission of the U.S. Department of Defense. The report indicates that family-related difficulties may affect a service member's deployability, their ability to remain deployed, and even their decision to continue military service. This relationship should not be interpreted as reducing the family to its utility for the institution. Rather, it demonstrates the interdependence between individual functioning, family stability, and professional readiness.

A gradual pathway can therefore be proposed:

- individual vulnerability;
- family and occupational effects;
- access to support and resources;
- adaptation;
- individual and family resilience;
- contribution to institutional resilience.

This pathway should not, however, be interpreted as an automatic causal relationship. Financial difficulties, disability, family problems, or challenges associated with reintegration do not inevitably affect the functioning of a military institution. Institutional relevance may instead emerge

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when vulnerabilities are persistent, cumulative, insufficiently addressed, or experienced across a significant proportion of the military community. Maintaining this distinction is essential in order to avoid the excessive securitisation of social problems.

The concept of *readiness* provides an additional link between these levels. Within the literature on military families, readiness and resilience are closely related but analytically distinct concepts. Readiness concerns the availability of resources and preparedness to address the particular demands associated with military life, whereas resilience refers to processes of adaptation in the face of adversity. Meadows et al. (2016) indicate that family readiness includes awareness of deployment-related challenges, possession of the skills required to manage them, and knowledge of available resources.

This distinction moves social work beyond an exclusively reactive role and towards a preventive one. When intervention occurs only after a crisis has developed, its potential is largely confined to managing consequences. By contrast, early identification of vulnerabilities, referral to appropriate services, strengthening support networks, and preparing families for periods of transition may help develop adaptive resources before difficulties escalate into crises. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019) similarly proposes an integrated military family readiness system encompassing promotion, prevention, intervention, and sustainment and emphasises the importance of a coherent and adaptive support system.

The relevance of social work to institutional resilience becomes particularly visible at this point. Its contribution does not consist in transforming the social worker into an operational defence actor. Rather, military social work addresses one of the resources upon which institutional functioning depends: the adaptive capacity of individuals and families. A system capable of facilitating access to resources, identifying vulnerabilities, and developing appropriate support mechanisms cannot eliminate adversity, but it may reduce the likelihood that its effects will accumulate to the point of impairing social and professional functioning.

Institutional resilience therefore cannot be reduced to the sum of individual resilience, but neither can it be constructed independently of individuals. A resilient institution is not merely one composed of people capable of enduring adversity; it is also an institution capable of supporting them when their individual adaptive capacity is exceeded. Within this relationship, military social work may be understood as an interface between individual vulnerability and institutional resources,

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contributing to the transformation of social protection from an exclusively reactive response into a component of organisational prevention and adaptation.

This analysis leads back to the article's central hypothesis. Military social work does not, in itself, constitute an instrument of national security in the traditional sense. Its contribution is indirect: protecting individuals and families may support adaptive capacity, which, under certain conditions, may in turn contribute to military readiness and institutional resilience. The relationship between human security and national security is therefore one of complementarity rather than substitution.

2. Military Social Work in Romania: Challenges and Directions for Development

In Romania, the social protection of military personnel is supported by an existing institutional and legal framework. Within the Romanian Ministry of National Defence, the Directorate for Personnel Quality of Life (*Direcția calitatea vieții personalului* – DCVP) develops and implements policies and programmes concerning the quality of life of active-duty, reserve, and retired personnel. Its organisational structure includes specialised components responsible for supporting participants in military actions and war veterans, as well as for maintaining records, providing assistance, and monitoring participants in military actions and the surviving family members of deceased personnel (Ministerul Apărării Naționale, n.d.).

An important legislative reference is Law No. 168/2020, which regulates the rights of personnel participating in military actions, missions, and operations, including veterans of theatres of operations, wounded and disabled personnel, and the surviving family members of deceased personnel. From a social work perspective, it is particularly relevant that the law provides for the possibility of establishing centres for social assistance, medico-social assistance, and operational psychology, as well as support measures for the families of participating personnel (Parlamentul României, 2020). The Romanian institutional framework therefore provides mechanisms through which vulnerability may be addressed not only by granting statutory entitlements but also through support and reintegration measures.

Nevertheless, the existence of legal provisions is not, in itself, sufficient to establish the effectiveness of social interventions. In the absence of empirical data concerning beneficiaries' experiences and service outcomes, conclusions regarding systemic deficiencies would exceed the

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evidence available to the present study. It is, however, possible to identify directions for development that are consistent with the resilience-based perspective advanced in this article.

A first direction concerns strengthening the continuity of intervention, particularly during transitions involving active service, injury or the acquisition of a disability, transfer to reserve status, and reintegration into civilian life. A second involves integrating the family more systematically into the assessment and prevention of vulnerabilities rather than viewing family members exclusively as secondary beneficiaries of statutory entitlements. In complex cases, an integrated *case management* approach could facilitate coordination among social, medical, occupational, and community-based services.

A further direction concerns strengthening cooperation between military structures and civilian support systems. Cooperation with public authorities, public institutions, and non-governmental organisations already forms part of the responsibilities of the DCVP, thereby providing an institutional foundation upon which such interventions may be further developed (Ministerul Apărării Naționale, n.d.).

The development of military social work in Romania therefore does not require the construction of an entirely new system, but rather the strengthening, integration, and evaluation of existing mechanisms. Greater emphasis on prevention, continuity of intervention, and resource coordination may enhance the capacity of social protection mechanisms to support individual and family resilience and, indirectly, institutional resilience.

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3. Conclusions and Recommendations

The broadening of security from an exclusive focus on the protection of the state towards greater attention to the protection of individuals makes it possible to reconsider the role that social policies and social work interventions may play within military systems. The analysis presented in this article nevertheless demonstrates the importance of maintaining clear conceptual boundaries: social vulnerability does not, in itself, constitute a threat to national security, nor can military social work be equated with a traditional security or defence instrument. The relationship between these domains is indirect and is mediated through resilience.

Returning to the research question formulated at the outset, the analysis suggests that social work provided to military personnel, veterans, and their families may be regarded as a complementary component of national security insofar as it contributes to identifying and mitigating vulnerabilities, facilitates access to resources and services, and supports processes of individual and family adaptation. Recent scholarship within the emerging field of military social work in Romania has already highlighted the relevance of social work interventions to veterans' reintegration, family support, and individual and collective resilience.

The research hypothesis is therefore supported at the theoretical and analytical level: the contribution of military social work to national security is not direct, but operates through an intermediate pathway - social protection; adaptive capacity; individual and family resilience; contribution to institutional resilience.

This relationship should not be interpreted mechanically. A resilient institution does not emerge simply from the aggregation of resilient individuals; it also depends on the institution's capacity to identify vulnerabilities and mobilise resources when individual adaptive capacity is exceeded.

In Romania, the further development of the field does not require starting from scratch. The existing legislative and institutional framework already provides mechanisms for supporting military personnel, veterans, and their families. The challenge lies instead in strengthening an integrated and preventive approach centred on continuity of support. Three principal directions may therefore be identified: strengthening social work interventions during transitions between military service and civilian life; integrating families more systematically into the assessment and prevention of vulnerabilities; and further developing cooperation among military structures, civilian public

services, and non-governmental organisations. Recent Romanian scholarship already points towards the relevance of institutional cooperation and civil society involvement in supporting the military community.

The principal limitation of the present study derives from its theoretical, analytical, and documentary character. In the absence of an empirical component, the article cannot assess the actual effectiveness of existing services or beneficiaries' experiences of those services. Future research could empirically examine the proposed relationship through interviews with military personnel, veterans, family members, and professionals working in the field, as well as through case studies focusing on reintegration pathways and access to support services.

Ultimately, human security and national security should not be placed in competition with one another. Protecting individuals does not diminish state security; under certain conditions, it may contribute to the state's capacity to remain functional and resilient. From this perspective, military social work occupies a discreet yet meaningful space between human vulnerability and institutional resilience: it does not defend borders, but it can contribute to protecting the people who make their defence possible.

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