Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară
Romanian Journal of Military Social Work (RJMSW)
Revue roumaine d'assistance sociale militaire (RRASM)
ISSN: 3120-2179
Vol. 1, Nr. 4, Octombrie - Decembrie 2026
https://rrasm.ro/ redactie@rrasm.ro

SOCIAL WORK IN NATO, UN AND EU MISSIONS

The role of the military social worker in multinational crisis management operations

Ropan Ioan Emanuel
Lieutenant
22nd Infantry Battalion "Romanați"
Multinational Brigade South-East, Craiova
Ministry of National Defence, Romania
ORCID: 0009-0007-7189-9462
E-mail: emanuelropan07@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Contemporary military operations are conducted almost exclusively in a multinational format, under the auspices of NATO, the United Nations or the European Union, and this context also transforms the way in which military social work fulfils its role. This article explains, in accessible terms, what the military social worker actually does in each of the three mission frameworks, where the differences between them lie, and what challenges arise in practice. The analysis shows that NATO missions retain their emphasis on the welfare of their own forces and on civil-military cooperation, UN peacekeeping missions extend social work activity towards the local civilian population and towards disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes, while EU missions combine a military component with civilian rule-of-law and security-sector reform missions, in which social work skills are engaged mainly in an indirect manner. The article also highlights the essential role of the support granted to the families who remain at home, as well as the need for specialized training of Romanian military social workers for the multinational environment.

Keywords: military social work, NATO missions, peacekeeping, civil-military cooperation, CSDP, resilience, reintegration.

1. INTRODUCTION

No modern army operates on its own any longer. Whether we speak of a NATO-led operation, of a United Nations peacekeeping mission, or of an EU civilian or military mission, service members share the theatre of operations with colleagues from dozens of countries and work alongside police officers, diplomats, civil servants, non-governmental organizations and humanitarian agencies. Within this complex landscape, the military social worker no longer deals only with situations arising inside his or her own unit, but must also

Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară
Romanian Journal of Military Social Work (RJMSW)
Revue roumaine d'assistance sociale militaire (RRASM)
ISSN: 3120-2179
Vol. 1, Nr. 4, Octombrie - Decembrie 2026
https://rrasm.ro/ redactie@rrasm.ro

understand the different rules, doctrines and organizational cultures of the international actors involved.

Over the past decades, military social work has consolidated itself as a distinct specialization of the profession, with its own set of competencies: supporting personnel during deployment, counselling the families who remain at home, intervening in crisis situations, offering support after critical incidents and facilitating reintegration upon return (Rubin et al., 2013).

When these competencies are transferred into a multinational environment, practical questions arise: who defines the social worker's mandate — the troop-contributing nation or the organization that leads the mission? Can the social worker work with the local civilian population, or only with own personnel? How is the bond with a family located thousands of kilometres away maintained? The answers differ from one organization to another, and knowing these differences is useful both for practitioners and for decision-makers within the Romanian military system.

As Bârzan and Sava (2026) point out, the legal framework for military social work serves as the foundation for the operationalization of psychosocial support within the armed forces, defining professional boundaries and responsibilities both at the national level and during multinational missions conducted under the aegis of NATO. Furthermore, the paradigmatic shift highlighted in recent specialized literature reflects a strategic orientation "from national security to human security," placing individual and institutional resilience at the core of modern crisis management missions (Călăfăteanu, 2026).

2. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

On the basis of the specialized literature and of doctrinal documents, we formulate the following hypotheses:

(1) the role of the military social worker differs significantly between NATO missions, UN peacekeeping missions and EU missions, depending on the nature and mandate of each operation;

(2) social workers contribute to the resilience and cohesion of troops in the theatre of operations and to the support of the families who remain at home;

(3) the doctrinal and legal framework of the lead organization — NATO's CIMIC doctrine, the UN Capstone Doctrine or the EU Global Strategy — directly shapes the limits within which social work can act;

(4) UN missions and the civilian missions of the EU offer the social worker opportunities to work with the local population and with other humanitarian actors, whereas NATO missions remain centred primarily on their own personnel;

Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară
Romanian Journal of Military Social Work (RJMSW)
Revue roumaine d'assistance sociale militaire (RRASM)
ISSN: 3120-2179
Vol. 1, Nr. 4, Octombrie - Decembrie 2026
https://rrasm.ro/ redactie@rrasm.ro

(5) Romania's participation in all three types of missions creates the premises for developing an integrated national model of military social work in a multinational context.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present paper is a review of the specialized literature, carried out through the analysis of scientific articles published in recognized international journals and of official documents issued by the three organizations.

Databases such as PubMed, Scopus and Web of Science were consulted, alongside NATO doctrinal publications (the AJP-3.19 doctrine on civil-military cooperation), United Nations documents (the Capstone Doctrine for peacekeeping operations, Security Council Resolution 1325) and the strategic documents of the European Union (the 2016 Global Strategy on foreign and security policy).

Studies and reports published over the last two decades, addressing military social work, psychosocial support in missions and crisis management, were selected. No interviews or original surveys were conducted; all information comes from already published sources verified by specialists.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Military social work — the general framework

Military social work is defined by the adaptation of the profession's specific methods to the realities of military life: hierarchy, deployments, risk, separation from family and permanent mobility.

The field's reference handbook identifies as central tasks individual and family counselling, preparing the unit for deployment, post-critical-incident intervention and liaison with health and social protection institutions (Rubin et al., 2013).

In the United States, social work education recognized this specialization through dedicated curricular guides, which require future military social workers to acquire knowledge about the deployment cycle, operational stress and the particularities of military families (CSWE, 2015).

A key concept for understanding social work activity in missions is the emotional cycle of deployment described by Pincus and his colleagues (2001): from the preparation and departure stage, through the deployment proper, to homecoming and reintegration, every family goes through a succession of states — numbness, sadness, emotional discomfort and, upon return, joy mixed with readjustment anxiety.

Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară
Romanian Journal of Military Social Work (RJMSW)
Revue roumaine d'assistance sociale militaire (RRASM)
ISSN: 3120-2179
Vol. 1, Nr. 4, Octombrie - Decembrie 2026
https://rrasm.ro/ redactie@rrasm.ro

The use of alternative psychosocial analysis tools—such as cultural resources and military documentaries—facilitates an understanding of the complexity of the traumatic phenomenon and of adaptation within the operational environment (Doca, 2026).

The social worker acts, in practice, at every stage: he or she prepares the family before departure, maintains the connection during the mission and supports reintegration upon return. Studies on reserve families show that, during the deployment, the family experiences an "ambiguous absence" — the family member is away, yet present by phone or e-mail — and that this ambiguity generates additional stress, especially around homecoming (Faber et al., 2008).

4.2. Social work in NATO missions

NATO missions are, par excellence, military missions: from KFOR in Kosovo (1999) to ISAF in Afghanistan (2001–2014) and the deterrence operations on the eastern flank, the main purpose remains the achievement of military objectives, not humanitarian assistance. In this framework, the social worker's role is first and foremost centred on the national contingent: preventing and managing operational stress, counselling service members in difficulty, intervening after traumatic incidents and supporting those who remain at home — the families and the rear-echelon support elements of the deployed unit.

A second level of activity is opened by civil-military cooperation, known under the acronym CIMIC. Allied doctrine AJP-3.19 defines CIMIC as a joint military function that integrates an understanding of the civil actors and factors in the operating environment and facilitates the interaction between NATO structures and non-military actors, in support of mission accomplishment (NATO, 2018). Translated into the language of social work, this means that the military social worker does not personally distribute humanitarian aid to the local population, but contributes to assessing community needs, coordinating with local authorities and international organizations, and identifying social risks that may affect the stability of the area. Experience from the Balkan missions showed that the welfare of the civilian population is closely linked to the security of the forces, and social workers can bring a distinct contribution through their expertise in working with vulnerable groups.

Finally, the literature confirms that social support at unit level protects against the consequences of stress: psychological resilience, peer support and the support received after return are factors that reduce traumatic stress and depressive symptoms (Pietrzak et al., 2010). In practice, the military social worker is one of the principal builders of this support.

4.3. Social work in UN missions

UN peacekeeping missions follow a different logic. The Capstone Doctrine, the document that underpins the entire peacekeeping activity, establishes three basic principles: the consent

Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară
Romanian Journal of Military Social Work (RJMSW)
Revue roumaine d'assistance sociale militaire (RRASM)
ISSN: 3120-2179
Vol. 1, Nr. 4, Octombrie - Decembrie 2026
https://rrasm.ro/ redactie@rrasm.ro

of the parties, impartiality, and the non-use of force except in self-defence and in defence of the mandate (United Nations, 2008).

Today's multidimensional missions combine military, police and civilian components and have increasingly complex mandates: the protection of civilians, support for political processes, the organization of elections, assistance to refugees and the demobilization of former combatants. At present, tens of thousands of military personnel, police officers and civilians from all over the world are deployed in such missions.

This framework opens for the military social worker a wider spectrum of activity than in NATO missions. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes are the most telling example: withdrawing a former combatant from military life does not mean merely handing in a weapon, but also schooling, vocational training, psychological support and reconnection with family and community — all activities that correspond exactly to the competencies of the social worker (Knight & Özerdem, 2004). The social and professional reintegration of veterans and former combatants requires a structural approach throughout the entire military life cycle, extending beyond the scope of strictly reactive interventions following the conclusion of missions (Sava, Sava, and Bârzan, 2026).

At the same time, Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security made the protection of women and children affected by conflict an operational obligation, not an option (UN Security Council, 2000), which increased the need for professionals trained in working with victims of violence and with vulnerable persons. This approach reflects the shift from classical perspectives focused strictly on state defense to modern principles of human security (Călăfăteanu, 2026).

Last but not least, it must be said that peacekeeping too comes at a cost for service members. A prospective study conducted on former military personnel deployed on peacekeeping missions showed that a lack of social support and stressful life events are associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms, even several years after return (Dirkzwager et al., 2003).

The synthesis on the psychology of the peacekeeper reaches a similar conclusion: the sources of stress in peacekeeping missions differ from those in war — isolation, the uncertainty of the mandate, contact with civilian suffering — and require tailored interventions (Britt & Adler, 2003).

The military social worker therefore remains a necessary presence in these missions as well, both for the contingent's own personnel and for supporting the civilian components.

Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară
Romanian Journal of Military Social Work (RJMSW)
Revue roumaine d'assistance sociale militaire (RRASM)
ISSN: 3120-2179
Vol. 1, Nr. 4, Octombrie - Decembrie 2026
https://rrasm.ro/ redactie@rrasm.ro

4.4. Social work in EU missions

The European Union acts on both tracks, but with an original construction: the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) allows the EU to launch both military operations and civilian crisis management missions. Since 2003, when the first common military operation (Artemis, in the Democratic Republic of Congo) and the first civilian mission (EUPOL Proxima, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) were launched, the EU has deployed numerous missions, from EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina (since 2004) to civilian rule-of-law and police reform missions, such as EULEX Kosovo or EUCAP Sahel.

The 2016 EU Global Strategy, "Shared vision, common action: a stronger Europe", emphasizes the need for coherence between the security dimension and the development dimension and proposes a Union that defends its values and contributes to peacebuilding (European Union, 2016). Implementation falls, to a large extent, on the Union's diplomatic structure — the European External Action Service — and on cooperation with the national foreign ministries, as academic analysis of this mechanism shows (Vanhoonacker et al., 2015).

From a social work perspective, EU missions display a particularity: in civilian missions, the vast majority of experts are police officers, lawyers and civil servants, while social work departments appear more rarely and in a less structured form.

This does not mean that the social dimension is absent, but that it is integrated in a cross-cutting manner: community policing reform, support for victims, assistance to vulnerable persons and the reconstruction of local social services are objectives in which social work competencies prove useful.

Here, in our opinion, an opportunity also takes shape: once the EU's ambitions in the field of defence grow, there is room for a better defined social work component, both for its own personnel and for the population of the host states.

4.5. Ethical and professional challenges in the multinational environment

Working in international missions amplifies the dilemmas that are specific to the profession. The first is that of dual commitment: the social worker is an officer, but also a professional bound to the client's good, and sometimes the interest of the mission and the interest of the person can come into conflict (Rubin et al., 2013). The second concerns confidentiality: in the theatre of operations, the intimate space of counselling is limited, and the commander expects information about the service member's capacity to carry out his duties. The third challenge is interoperability: each troop-contributing nation comes with its own social work system, its own confidentiality rules and different resources, and the standardization of practices remains an unresolved issue.

Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară
Romanian Journal of Military Social Work (RJMSW)
Revue roumaine d'assistance sociale militaire (RRASM)
ISSN: 3120-2179
Vol. 1, Nr. 4, Octombrie - Decembrie 2026
https://rrasm.ro/ redactie@rrasm.ro

Finally, the distance from the family remains one of the strongest stress factors. Studies on military children show that the repeated deployment of the parent is associated with emotional and behavioural difficulties, while the parent remaining at home takes on, almost alone, the burden of care, often without adequate support (Lester et al., 2010).

A recent review of resilience-building programmes for military families, which analysed 32 studies and over 14,000 participants, confirms that useful interventions exist but are extremely heterogeneous, and insists on flexible delivery, including online, for families located in different corners of the world (Hébert et al., 2024). Another review, focused on social and psychological support connected with international deployment, finds that the literature is dominated by reactive services — offered after problems have already appeared — and that studies from outside North America are rare, leaving the European context almost unexplored (Ohlsson et al., 2024).

These findings directly support a practical message: military social work in Romania must develop in the direction of prevention, family-centered programs, and its own research. (Călăfăteanu, 2026; RRASM, 2026)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis carried out confirms all five hypotheses.

First, the role of the military social worker genuinely differs between the three organizations:

- in NATO missions he or she acts almost exclusively for the national contingent and for civil-military cooperation (NATO, 2018);
- in UN missions the mandate extends towards the local population and DDR-type programmes (United Nations, 2008; Knight & Özerdem, 2004);
- while in EU missions he or she works within a framework in which the military component and the civilian one interlock (European Union, 2016).

Second, the literature confirms the contribution of social work to the resilience of troops and of families (Pietrzak et al., 2010; Hébert et al., 2024).

Third, the doctrine of each organization clearly establishes the limits of action (Bârzan and Sava, 2026).

Hypotheses four and five are also validated: UN and EU missions offer additional opportunities to work with the civilian population, and Romania's experience in all three frameworks creates the premise of an integrated model.

For practice, several concrete recommendations follow: the explicit inclusion of social workers in the structure of deployed contingents, their training for work in the multinational

environment, the development of support programmes for the families who remain at home and, last but not least, the initiation of empirical studies in the Romanian military context, to cover the gap signalled by the international literature (Ohlsson et al., 2024). Military social work is not a luxury in NATO, UN or EU missions, but a component of the operational capability of the forces.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, FUNDING AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors thank their colleagues in the field of military social work for the exchange of ideas and for the observations offered on the preliminary versions of the paper. This research received no external funding. The authors declare the absence of any conflict of interest.

6. REFERENCES

Bârzan, C. A., & Sava, G. I. (2026). Cadrul juridic al asistenței sociale militare în România și în statele NATO: o analiză comparativă. *Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară, 1*(3). **https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23020007**

Britt, T. W., & Adler, A. B. (Eds.). (2003). *The psychology of the peacekeeper: Lessons from the field.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Călăfăteanu, N. I. (2026). De la Securitatea Națională la Securitatea Umană: Rolul Asistenței Sociale Militare în consolidarea rezilienței individuale și instituționale. *Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară, 1*(3) **https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23020460**

Consiliul de Securitate al ONU. (2000). *Rezoluția 1325 privind femeile, pacea și securitatea.* New York: Națiunile Unite. **https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325(2000)**

Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Specialized practice curricular guide for military social work.* Alexandria, VA: CSWE. **https://www.cswe.org/sites/default/files/2026-07/Curricular_Guide_Military_Social_Work_2015_EPAS.pdf**

Dirkzwager, A. J. E., Bramsen, I., & van der Ploeg, H. M. (2003). Social support, coping, life events, and posttraumatic stress symptoms among former peacekeepers: A prospective study. *Personality and Individual Differences, 34*(8), 1545–1559. **https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(02)00198-8**

Doca, A. S. (2026). Filmul și documentarul militar ca instrumente de analiză în asistența socială militară: experiența traumei, reziliența și reintegrarea militarilor și veteranilor.

Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară, 1(3). **https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23016552**

Faber, A. J., Willerton, E., Clymer, S. R., MacDermid, S. M., & Weiss, H. M. (2008). Ambiguous absence, ambiguous presence: A qualitative study of military reserve families in wartime. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22* (2), 222–234. **https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.22.2.222**

Hébert, M. L., Tippe, J. M., Aquin, C., Maximos, M., Brémault-Phillips, S., & Sevigny, P. R. (2024). Military family-centred resilience-building programming across the deployment cycle: A scoping review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 21* (10), 1378. **https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21101378**

Knight, M., & Ozerdem, A. (2004). Guns, camps and cash: Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in transitions from war to peace. *Journal of Peace Research, 41*(4), 509–523. **https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343304044479**

Lester, P., Peterson, K., Reeves, J., Knauss, L., Glover, D., Mogil, C., … Beardslee, W. (2010). The long war and parental combat deployment: Effects on military children and at-home spouses. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 49*(4), 310–320. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2010.01.003**

NATO, Oficiul pentru Standardizare. (2018). *AJP-3.19: Doctrina aliată comună pentru cooperarea civilo-militară (Ediția 1).* Bruxelles: NATO. **https://www.coemed.org/files/stanags/01_AJP/AJP-3.19_EDA_V1_E_2509.pdf**

Națiunile Unite. (2008). *Operațiile ONU de menținere a păcii: Principii și ghiduri (Doctrina Capstone).* New York: Departamentul ONU pentru Operații de Menținere a Păcii. **https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/capstone-doctrine-united-nations-peacekeeping-operations-principles-and-guidelines/**

Ohlsson, A., Nilsson, S., & Larsson, G. (2024). Social and psychological support for military personnel and their families in connection with military deployment: A scoping review and thematic analysis. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 10*(1). **https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v10i1.533**

Pietrzak, R. H., Johnson, D. C., Goldstein, M. B., Malley, J. C., & Southwick, S. M. (2010). Psychosocial buffers of traumatic stress, depressive symptoms, and psychosocial

difficulties in veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom: The role of resilience, unit support, and postdeployment social support. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 120*(1–3), 188–192. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2009.04.015**

Pincus, S. H., House, R., Christenson, J., & Adler, L. E. (2001). The emotional cycle of deployment: A military family perspective. *US Army Medical Department Journal, 4*(5), 6. **http://cdm15290.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15290coll3/id/898**

Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară (RRASM), (2026). *Ghid de Asistență Socială Militară – Întrebări frecvente, definiții și resurse.* **https://rrasm.ro/ghid-de-asistenta-sociala-militara/**

Rubin, A., Weiss, E. L., & Coll, J. E. (2013). *Handbook of military social work.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Sava, M. I., Sava, G. I., & Bârzan, C. A.(2026). Reintegrarea socială și profesională a veteranilor după încheierea carierei militare. Studiu de caz (I). *Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară, 1*(3). **https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23237479**

Uniunea Europeană. (2016). *Vis comun, acțiune comună: o Europă mai puternică. Strategia globală a Uniunii Europene pentru politica externă și de securitate* . Bruxelles: Serviciul European de Acțiune Externă. **https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23237479**

Vanhoonacker, S., Pomorska, K., & Petiteville, F. (Eds.). (2015). *The European External Action Service and national foreign ministries: Influence through bureaucracy.* . London: Routledge.