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The Impact of International Mission Participation on Family Life

A Case Study of an Active Duty Military Personnel in the Romanian Army

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Abstract

The participation of the military in international missions and operations under the aegis of NATO, the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is an essential component of the commitments assumed by Romania within the collective security structures. Although these missions contribute to the professional development of military personnel and to the fulfillment of the state's strategic objectives, they can generate significant challenges for the military's family life. The present research uses the case study method and is based on a semi-structured interview conducted with an active military officer with extensive experience in foreign theaters of operations. The results highlight the fact that separation from the family, the reorganization of family roles, the emotional difficulties of the children and the process of reintegration of the veteran after returning from the mission are the main challenges that influence the family dynamics. At the same time, the study identifies the existence of adaptation and resilience mechanisms that actively contribute to maintaining the family's functionality. From the perspective of military social work, the results obtained underline the need to develop specialized support services for military personnel and their families before and after participating in international missions.

Keywords: coping mechanisms, family resilience, international missions, military families, military social work, reintegration, Romanian Army.

1. Introduction

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The participation of Romanian military personnel in international missions represents an important component of Romania's commitments within collective security organizations, such as NATO, the EU, the UN, and the OSCE. These missions involve the deployment of military personnel to foreign theaters of operations under conditions characterized by risk, prolonged separation from family, and intense psychological demands.

Specialized literature highlights that temporary separation from the family, the uncertainty associated with the operational environment, as well as post-mission reintegration difficulties can generate significant effects on the emotional and functional balance of the family (Pincus et al., 2001; Saltzman et al., 2011). These effects can include communication difficulties, the reorganization of roles within the family, as well as challenges in the military personnel's reintegration process upon returning from the mission.

Pincus et al. (2011) use the expression „emotional cycle of deployment", which includes the following stages: anticipation of departure, deployment on the mission, emotional support during the mission, and post-mission reintegration, with each stage involving specific challenges for both the military personnel and their family members. Thus, the stage prior to departure involves anxiety and uncertainty; during the mission, difficulties associated with separation and limited direct contact; and post-mission reintegration requires renegotiating roles and responsibilities developed during the period of absence.

From the perspective of family systems theory developed by Bowen (1978), the family functions as an interdependent system, in which changes occurring at the level of one member can influence the entire family unit. Transposing family systems theory into the military context, the departure of a member on an international mission can cause changes in family roles, parental responsibilities, and ways of communication among family members.

According to Walsh (2016), resilience plays an important role in increasing family cohesion, whereby resilient families can develop effective mechanisms for communication, mutual support, and flexibility in assuming the family roles that belong to each family member. „Resilience does not imply the absence of suffering, but the capacity to find ways to adapt in the face of difficult experiences. In this process, social support and specialized interventions can play an important role." (Honcu et al., 2026a)

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In their work based on the ABCX model, McCubbin and Patterson (1983) highlight the existence of a relationship between a stress factor (combat missions) and family outcomes. In this model, A (the stressor event) interacts with B (the family's resources for coping with the crisis), which interacts with C (the family's definition of the event), producing X (the crisis). It was designed to study the variables that differentiate families capable of maintaining their balance and functionality from those that develop significant adaptation difficulties due to events they perceive as highly stressful.

Although numerous international studies and research highlight the impact of military missions on the military personnel's family, Romanian literature regarding the experiences of military families is still relatively limited. This reality underscores the need to deepen research in the field and to develop adequate support mechanisms for military personnel and their families. In this context, military social work plays an essential role by providing counseling, intervention, and psychosocial support services, facilitating the process of adaptation to the changes generated by participation in international missions.

In North Atlantic Alliance member states such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, military social work represents a deeply institutionalized component of the support system intended for active duty military personnel, veterans, and their families. Interventions in this component target family counseling for military personnel, support for children, crisis intervention, case management, and facilitating the post-mission reintegration of military personnel.

Although military social work is not yet legally regulated in Romania, „the analysis of the national legislative framework, compared to European principles, shows that important steps have been taken in the recognition and protection of veterans. However, the reality of practical application highlights the existence of difficulties related to the implementation of measures and effective access to the provided rights and services." (Honcu et al., 2026b). The state must modernize its support systems to properly address the emerging needs of veterans (Ropan et al., 2026). The purpose of this case study is to analyze the impact of participating in international missions on the family life of an active military officer from the Romanian Army,

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focusing on family relationship dynamics and the readaptation process after returning from the mission.

2. Methodology

To carry out this study, a qualitative approach was used in the form of a case study. This method allows for a detailed analysis of a concrete situation, offering the possibility of an in-depth understanding of how participation in international missions directly influences family life.

The analyzed case was selected intentionally (criterion-based sampling), considering the relevance of the participant's professional experience to the research topic. The unit of analysis is represented by an active military officer and his family, directly involved in the experience of participating in international missions.

The data were obtained through a semi-structured interview conducted with the participant, supplemented, where necessary, with observations and informal discussions. The interview aimed to capture personal experiences related to international missions, as well as how they influenced the dynamics and functioning of the family.

The interview guide was built around main themes, such as the experience of participating in international missions, the impact of separation on the family, the coping strategies used by family members, and the reintegration process after returning from the mission. Among the questions addressed to the participant were: „How did you perceive the experience of participating in international missions?", „What were the main difficulties encountered by the family during your absence?", and „How did the process of readapting to family life go after returning from the mission?".

The collected information was analyzed through a thematic approach, tracking recurrent aspects such as separation from the family, the reintegration process after returning from the mission, and changes occurring in family relationships. Throughout the research, specific ethical principles of social research were respected, including protecting the participant's identity and using the data exclusively for academic purposes, with his informed consent.

The full text of the interview used in this research is provided in Appendix 1.

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3. Case Presentation

The case analyzed in this study is that of an active military officer in the Romanian Army, aged approximately 35-45 years, married, with children, who has repeatedly participated in international missions in theaters of operations. The participant has over 15 years of military experience, a period during which he was involved in several missions carried out outside the national territory. These experiences involved periods of separation from the family, followed by processes of reintegration into domestic and professional life.

From the participant's account, it emerges that participation in international missions was perceived as a natural component of a military career, but the impact on family life varied depending on the duration of the missions and the family context of each period. The family consists of a husband, wife, and one or more children, and over the years, it has faced successive adaptations related to the repeated absence of the parent on a mission, but also to the reintegration process upon his return.

4. The Experience of Participating in International Missions

From the participant's account, it emerges that participation in international missions represented one of the most important professional experiences in his military career. He participated in several missions carried out outside the national territory, in different operational contexts, which involved long periods of separation from the family and adaptation to specific working conditions in theaters of operations.

The military officer described participation in missions as being „a normal part of the military profession", but stressed that each departure was accompanied by both professional and personal challenges. According to him, prior training before deployment contributed to developing the capacity to adapt, but the field experience required a high level of responsibility and permanent vigilance.

During the interview, the participant mentioned that one of the most difficult aspects was the distance from the family. Although modern means of communication allowed maintaining contact with those at home, they could not compensate for the physical absence

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from family life. He confirmed that important moments in the children's lives or problems arising at home were felt with a sense of helplessness, as opportunities for direct involvement were limited. In this regard, he stated that „The hardest part was not being on the mission, but the fact that I couldn't be next to my family when they needed me."

At the same time, the participant highlighted that the experiences lived during missions contributed to the development of valuable personal and professional skills, such as self-control, decision-making capacity in difficult situations, and adaptability. He believes that participating in international missions offered him important opportunities for professional development, but it also carried significant personal costs, particularly regarding family relationships. The analysis of the answers indicates that the experience of participating in international missions was simultaneously perceived as a source of professional satisfaction and as a stress-generating factor, mainly determined by operational responsibilities and temporary separation from the family.

5. Impact on the Family

The literature indicates that stressful life events, such as prolonged separation, accidents, or situations with traumatic potential, directly influence family balance and the way family members fulfill their roles within the family. In the case of high-risk professions, such as the military profession, these effects may be more intense, as uncertainty and physical distance are constant factors.

The participant's account reveals that periods of participation in international missions affected the entire family, not only the service member. Thus, periods of separation generated emotional and practical changes for all family members, who adopted and developed coping mechanisms to maintain family balance.

Regarding the children, the service member emphasized that the impact varied according to age, but that each departure was experienced emotionally. He stated that *"The children became accustomed to the departures over time, but every separation was difficult."*

Reconfiguration of Family Roles

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One of the most significant consequences of participation in international missions identified through the interview analysis was the temporary reconfiguration of family roles. The service member's absence led to a redistribution of responsibilities within the family, including household management, child-rearing, and the handling of everyday issues, which had previously been shared between both partners

The spouses of service members deployed on missions are often required to assume additional responsibilities related to child care and upbringing, household management, and financial resource management (Park, 2011). Doca et al. and Oprina (2026) emphasize that "For mothers caring for one or more children, this period is often marked by complex challenges. They become the primary source of stability for the children and are responsible for managing all aspects of daily life: administering the family budget, paying current expenses, maintaining the household, supervising and educating the children, interacting with educational and medical institutions, and managing unforeseen situations that may arise during the spouse's absence."

The children, in turn, developed their own ways of coping with the parent's absence. Nevertheless, there is a need for these children to benefit from continuous monitoring of their socio-emotional well-being and from appropriate support mechanisms. Oprina (2026a) confirms that "the risks identified among children from military families are comparable to those faced by minors in civilian environments who are in vulnerable situations. Understanding these risk factors, together with knowledge of protective factors, will contribute to the development of prevention strategies and to increasing the effectiveness of military social work interventions."

All these changes demonstrate the family's ability to reorganize itself in order to cope with situations generated by the service member's absence, in which the reconfiguration of family roles is an inevitable process and constitutes one of the main mechanisms supporting family functioning under conditions of temporary separation.

Post-Mission Reintegration

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A critical aspect highlighted during the interview is that the absence does not end upon returning home but continues through the process of readjustment to family life. The service member described this stage as one that requires time, stating that "After returning, I needed a few weeks to get back into the family routine," implying a period of mutual adjustment between himself and the family members.

The post-mission reintegration of veterans, involving the transition from military to civilian life, may require a rebalancing of family dynamics, a process that often generates tensions. The veteran "will either attempt to reclaim their previous role or will feel powerless in decision-making, which may make post-mission reintegration anything but easy in such cases" (Oprina, 2026b).

Overall, the findings indicate that the impact on the family is not limited to a single point in time but manifests across several stages: before departure, during the mission, and after returning home. Families develop adaptation mechanisms; however, each cycle of separation and reunion requires a new adjustment of relationships and family roles.

6. Results

The process of separation between the service member and the family represents an inherent component of the military career; however, this process generates significant effects on the entire family system. Separation from the family is perceived by both the service member and other family members as one of the most difficult experiences associated with military missions.

The study results highlight that the family adapts over time: the spouse learns how to manage household activities independently, assume a substantial portion of parental responsibilities, and cope with everyday challenges, while the children develop their own coping strategies in response to the temporary absence.

Another important finding is the complexity of the reintegration process into family life after returning from a mission. This does not occur automatically or instantaneously but involves a transition period of readjustment during which the family routine is gradually recalibrated.

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The findings demonstrate that the impact of missions is not limited to the deployment period itself but encompasses the entire cycle: departure, separation, the mission itself, and the return home. Each stage presents different challenges for the family.

At the same time, the study highlights adaptation and resilience mechanisms within the family that help maintain balance and long-term family functioning. These mechanisms are built over time and become stronger through repeated experiences of separation and reunification, representing an important resource for managing the difficulties associated with the military profession.

From the perspective of military social work, the findings reveal the crucial importance of providing support to both service members and their families through the implementation and development of specialized support services for military personnel, veterans, and their families. Counseling, psychosocial support, and preparation for periods of separation and reintegration can contribute to reducing difficulties and strengthening the family's capacity for adaptation.

Overall, the findings confirm the conclusions of the existing literature regarding the impact of military missions on service members' families. Separation, the reconfiguration of family roles, and reintegration following return from deployment constitute complex processes that influence family dynamics. At the same time, the family's capacity to develop adaptive mechanisms and resilience demonstrates the existence of significant resources that can be strengthened through specific military social work interventions, as a field capable of providing specialized support to military personnel, veterans, and their families in managing the challenges associated with participation in international missions.

7. Discussion

The results obtained from this case study indicate that participation in international missions profoundly influences the family life of the service member, both during deployment and after returning to the family environment. The interview revealed that the experience of participating

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in international missions is perceived as a natural component of a military career, yet one that has an almost constant impact on family balance and functioning.

A first important aspect identified in the research concerns family separation. The participant described this period as one of the most difficult, particularly from an emotional perspective, even though mission activities require a high level of discipline, concentration, and responsibility. These findings are consistent with the literature, which highlights that life events involving prolonged separation and uncertainty have direct effects on family functioning. From the perspective of Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), any change affecting one family member is reflected throughout the entire family system, which explains the reorganization of family roles during deployments.

In the case analyzed, this is evident in the way the spouse assumes daily responsibilities while the children adapt to the temporary absence of the parent. It was also noted that, although communication is maintained through remote means, it cannot replace physical presence, and certain family moments are experienced with considerable difficulty.

Another important aspect concerns the impact on children. The interview indicates that children gradually adapt to repeated departures; however, each separation continues to be emotionally challenging. This finding is also supported by the literature, which shows that children's reactions to parental separation are influenced by age, family context, and the duration of the absence (Saltzman et al., 2011).

A recurring element in studies of military families is that returning from a mission does not mean an immediate resumption of family routines. In the present case as well, the participant emphasized the need for a period of readjustment during which family roles and relationships are gradually reconfigured. This aspect is also highlighted by Pincus et al. (2001), who describe reintegration as a gradual process of family readjustment following the completion of a mission.

From a broader perspective, the literature shows that any potentially stressful life event—whether involving separation, illness, or other vulnerable situations—directly influences the functioning of the family as a whole. In the military profession, these effects are

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even more pronounced due to the risky nature of missions and the inability to participate directly in the family's daily life.

On the other hand, the findings also indicate the existence of adaptation mechanisms. Over time, families develop strategies to manage periods of separation and reintegration, demonstrating a form of resilience. This adaptive capacity is also identified in the literature as an important element in the functioning of families repeatedly exposed to stress.

In this context, professional socialization within the military also plays an important role. It contributes to preparing service members for operational demands by developing competencies such as discipline, self-control, and adaptability. However, family members do not undergo the same socialization process, which explains the difference in experiences between the military and family environments during deployments.

According to Bucur (2026), in the course material "The Socialization Process in Military Organizations" (course: Professional Socialization and Communication in the Military Organization, West University of Timișoara), military organizations are characterized by rigorous professional socialization programs aimed at integrating individuals into the hierarchical structure and developing behaviors specific to the military environment. These programs contribute to reducing role ambiguity and increasing cohesion and adaptability in situations of operational stress.

8. Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were carefully observed. The participant was informed about the purpose of the study, the manner in which the data would be used, and the voluntary nature of participation. In order to protect the identity of the participant and his family, all information that could have led to their identification was removed or anonymized. The collected data were used exclusively for academic and scientific purposes, based on the principles of confidentiality and personal data protection.

9. Study Limitations

The present study has several methodological limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research is based on a single case study, which limits the

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possibility of generalizing the conclusions to the broader military population. Second, the data presented are derived exclusively from the participant's narrative, without including the perspectives of the spouse or children, which could have provided a more comprehensive and triangulated understanding of the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the study offers a relevant qualitative perspective, also confirmed by the existing literature, demonstrating how participation in international missions may influence family dynamics and may serve as a starting point for future research conducted on larger samples. Furthermore, studies examining the role of military social work interventions before, during, and after participation in international missions would be particularly valuable.

10. Conclusions

The aim of the present study was to analyze and understand how participation in international missions influences the family life of an active service member in the Romanian Armed Forces, with particular emphasis on experiences associated with family separation, the reconfiguration of family roles, and the reintegration process following return from deployment.

The analysis of the empirical material leads to the conclusion that international missions represent not merely a professional event of limited duration but rather a cyclical phenomenon with profound and long-lasting effects on the entire family system. Separation generates increased emotional vulnerability and a redistribution of household responsibilities, whereby the family member remaining at home becomes the central pillar of administrative and parental stability. Although these challenges foster considerable resilience and adaptation over time among spouses and children, the post-mission stage opens a new critical phase—reintegration—which likewise requires time and adaptive effort to avoid role-related conflicts.

By correlating the case study findings with the national literature, the present research highlights that the family's internal coping mechanisms are often overburdened, making it necessary to move beyond spontaneous family resilience toward institutionalized and legally grounded support.

The development of a robust national framework for military social work capable of providing integrated services across the three identified stages—pre-mission assessment,

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counseling during separation, and dedicated post-mission family management programs—would ensure not only the social protection of veterans but also the preservation of family system functioning as a whole.

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APPENDIX 1 – Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The interview was conducted with an active service member of the Romanian Armed Forces who has experience in international missions.

1. How would you describe your experience of participating in international missions?

Participation in international missions has represented one of the most important professional experiences of my military career. I have always considered these missions to be part of the responsibilities associated with the military profession. They provided me with opportunities for both professional and personal development, but they also involved numerous challenges, particularly due to separation from my family.

2. How did you prepare for deployment?

Preparation consisted of professional training specific to the theater of operations, exercises, and activities aimed at developing adaptability and the ability to manage difficult situations. In addition, before each deployment, I discussed important aspects of daily life with my family in order to organize them during my absence.

3. What were the most difficult aspects of the mission?

From a professional perspective, the high level of responsibility and the need to remain constantly vigilant. From a personal perspective, the most difficult aspect was missing my family and being unable to be present when problems arose or important events occurred at home.

4. How did you experience separation from your family during the missions?

Separation from my family was the most difficult aspect of the missions. Although I was focused on mission-related activities, I constantly felt the absence of my family.

5. How was communication with your family maintained during the mission?

I maintained contact through telephone calls and online communication platforms. These means of communication were very helpful; however, they could not compensate for the lack of physical presence.

6. What were the most difficult family-related moments during your absence?

Situations in which problems arose at home or when the children experienced important events and I was not present.

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7. How was family life affected during your absence?

My wife had to assume most of the daily responsibilities, and the family had to adapt to my absence. This reorganization became a necessary routine for maintaining proper family functioning.

8. How did your children adapt to repeated deployments?

Gradually, they became accustomed to my departures; however, each separation was emotionally difficult. Their reactions varied depending on their age and the family circumstances at that particular time.

9. What role did your spouse play during this period?

My wife's role was essential, as she assumed and managed family responsibilities, the children's upbringing, and daily activities. Her support was extremely important in maintaining family balance throughout the missions.

10. How did your return home after the mission unfold?

It was a highly anticipated moment; however, readjustment did not occur immediately. It took time to become involved again in the family routine and to resume family responsibilities.

11. How much time was required to readjust to family life?

A few weeks were needed to regain the rhythm of family life.

12. AWere there any difficulties in resuming your roles within the family?

Yes. During the period of absence, certain routines and responsibilities are established and assumed by other family members. After returning, a period of adjustment is necessary for family roles to be redistributed and accepted by all members.

13. Overall, how do you perceive the impact of missions on family life?

I believe that participation in international missions has both positive effects and challenging consequences for family life. From a professional perspective, it contributes to the development of skills, experience, and professional maturity. From a family perspective, it involves periods of separation, adaptation, and continuous efforts on the part of all family members to maintain family balance and functioning.

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14. What do you consider to be the role of military social work in supporting military personnel, veterans, and their families?

I believe that military social work plays an essential role in supporting military personnel and their families, particularly during periods of separation, reintegration, and adaptation to the challenges associated with a military career. Through counseling, information services, and psychosocial support, it can help prevent family-related difficulties and strengthen the adaptive capacity of military personnel and their loved ones.

15. How do you assess the contribution of the Romanian Journal of Military Social Work to the development of this field in Romania?

The Romanian Journal of Military Social Work represents an important initiative for the promotion and development of this field. The journal provides a platform for dialogue between researchers and practitioners, contributes to the dissemination of research findings, and brings to the attention of the public and decision-makers the specific issues faced by military personnel, veterans, and their families. Furthermore, it can support the development of policies and services that are better tailored to the needs of the military community.

16. What message would you like to convey to military personnel, veterans, and readers of the Romanian Journal of Military Social Work?

I would like to convey that military service involves sacrifices and responsibilities that are shared not only by the service member but also by the family. It is important for military personnel and veterans not to hesitate to seek support when facing difficulties and to understand that adapting to the challenges of the profession becomes easier when there is support from family members, colleagues, and professionals. To the readers of the Romanian Journal of Military Social Work, I would like to express my appreciation for their interest in this field and my conviction that a better understanding of the realities of military life can contribute to the development of increasingly effective forms of support for military personnel, veterans, and their families. I would also like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude and wish continued success to the editorial team for this valuable initiative. Congratulations!