



# Support for War Veterans in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic

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RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

The main aim of this article is to describe the current state of care for war veterans. The first and second sections are devoted to the structure of the Slovak Armed Forces and describe the participation of Slovak soldiers in foreign missions. The next part of the article consists of sociological research among war veterans focused on the area of application in the civilian labour market, socioeconomic situation, and their health status. The main part consists of specific forms of support for war veterans and then their evaluation.

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## ESTABLISHMENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

After the dissolution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic in 1993, the Army of the Slovak Republic was created. After its reorganisation on 1 July 2002, was renamed to Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter referred to as AFSR or AF). A significant turning point in the development of the AFSR occurred in 2006, when basic military service ceased and the AF became fully professionalised (Prudek, 2023).

According to Act No. 321/2002 Coll. on the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic, the AFSR are the decisive executive element of the national defense system. Their main task is the defense of the Slovak Republic against attack by a foreign power, the defense of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of the borders of the State. They also contribute to the maintenance of the overall security of the Slovak Republic. The AFSR also perform tasks outside the territory of the Slovak Republic in accordance with international law, and perform tasks in the framework of the provision of humanitarian aid, military exercises, peace observation missions, and military operations.

The Armed Forces are managed by the Government and the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak republic (hereinafter referred to as MDSR or MoD). The Commander-in-Chief of the Slovak Armed Forces is the President of the Slovak Republic. The command of the Armed Forces is professionally, organizationally, and technically provided by the General Staff of the Slovak Armed Forces, headed by the Chief of the General Staff.

The basic components of the AFSR in terms of structure are: ground forces, air forces, and special operations forces. As of December 31, 2022, the number of 13,240 professional soldiers served in the Slovak Armed Forces. In terms of representation of men and women, a total of 1,800 female soldiers (13 % of the total number of military personnel) served in the AFSR in 2022 (Personnel Office of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic, 2023).

In times of crisis, the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic are complemented by the Armed Forces Reserves, which are composed of citizens enrolled in the Armed Forces Reserves.

The Armed Forces Reserves consists of:

- Citizens who have completed their service as a professional soldier and whose conscription obligation continues.

- Citizens who have completed their service in the Police Corps, the Prison and Justice Guard Corps, the Fire and Rescue Corps, the Mountain Rescue Service, the National Security Office, or the service of an armed member of the Financial Administration and whose conscription obligation continues.
- Citizens who have completed voluntary military training and whose conscription obligation continues.
- Citizens who have been called up to perform extraordinary service after its termination and whose conscription obligation continues.

As part of raising the conscription awareness and readiness of the citizens of the Slovak Republic for the defense of the State, the MDSR provides regular voluntary exercises of the so-called active reserves of the armed forces and also voluntary military training.

## DEPLOYMENT OF SLOVAK SOLDIERS IN FOREIGN MISSIONS AND OPERATIONS

Soldiers who have participated in foreign operations and missions, whether under the command of the Czechoslovak Army, the Army of the Slovak Republic, or the AFSR, represent a specific group of military personnel, which is characterized by a unique military experience compared to other members of the armed forces. Since the establishment of the Slovak Republic, the AFSR have undergone a gradual evolution in foreign operations and missions. Initially, professional soldiers were active only in United Nations Peacekeeping Missions (UNFICYP), but gradually participation expanded to operations and missions within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

The first foreign operation in which Czechoslovak soldiers participated after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 was Operation Desert Storm in Kuwait in 1991. Later, after the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic, the Army of the Slovak Republic began its participation in the foreign mission United Nations Protection Force in 1993 on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. In 2001, Slovak soldiers joined the peacekeeping mission in Eritrea. The Slovak Armed Forces also served in the Stabilization Force operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1999 to 2003, and in 2002 took command of the operational and training liaison team for logistic support in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan. Slovak soldiers also served in the Kosovo Force mission in Kosovo from 1999 to 2002 (Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2023a).

At present, the AFSR are participating in two NATO-led operations (Resolute Support) in Afghanistan and within NATO Headquarters in Bosnia and Herzegovina), two EU-led operations and missions (i.e., Operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina and The European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia), as well as in two UNFICYP missions in Cyprus and in the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization observer mission in Israel and Syria. Furthermore, members of the AFSR are present in Italy (i.e., The European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation Irini) and in Mali (UNMS; [Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2023a](#)).

## WAR VETERANS IN SLOVAKIA

According to Act No. 463/2003 on war veterans ([Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2003](#)) as amended; Act No. 328/2002 on social security for police officers and soldiers, as amended; ([Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, 2002](#)) on the amendment and supplementation of certain acts, (hereinafter referred to as “Act No. 463/2003”), a war veteran is a citizen of the Slovak Republic who has permanent residence in the territory of the Slovak Republic and:

1. Performed at least 90 days of military service outside the territory of the Slovak Republic as a member of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic or as a member of the Armed Forces of the States whose legal successor is the Slovak Republic, within the framework of peace observation missions, military operations or within the framework of the fulfilment of an obligation under an international treaty on common defense against attack;
2. was a soldier of the Czechoslovak army until 14 March 1939 and in the period from 14 March 1939 to 8 May 1945 was a participant in the national struggle for liberation;
3. between 1939 and 1945 as a participant in the national struggle for liberation:
  - was a member of the Czechoslovak army abroad or performed military service in it under the conditions laid down by a special regulation;
  - performed military service in the Allied army;
  - was a member of the First Czechoslovak Army in Slovakia
  - was a Czechoslovak partisan;
  - participated in the May Uprising of the Czech people in May 1945 and suffered serious injury as a result of the fighting;
4. was a Czechoslovak volunteer in Spain between 1936 and 1939.

War veterans can be divided into two groups:

1. Modern war veterans: Professional soldiers of the Slovak Armed Forces who served at least 90 days in foreign military operations or peace observation missions.
2. War veterans: Participants in the national struggle for liberation are persons whose activities are connected with participation in the Slovak National Uprising, which broke out on 29 August 1944 as a reaction to the domestic resistance movement to the entry of German occupation troops into the territory of the Slovak Republic. These war veterans are characterized by a high age (over 90 years) and are relatively low in numbers.

The MDSR decides on the granting of the status of war veteran based on a written application. If a professional soldier participated in a foreign military operation or mission during their military service, they may be granted the status of a war veteran after submitting an application for the status of a war veteran and fulfilling the conditions pursuant to Act No. 463/2003. A person who has died may be granted the status of a war veteran in memoriam upon fulfilment of the statutory conditions ([Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2023b](#), “Who can be granted” section).

From 2004 to 2023, the MDSR granted the status of war veteran to 10,160 persons. Currently, the MoD registers 8,616 living war veterans, of which 8,734 are modern war veterans and only 25 are war veterans (i.e., participants in the national struggle for liberation; [Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2022](#)).

## SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH AMONG WAR VETERANS AND MILITARY RETIREES

The Human Resources Section of the MoD monitors the social situation among military retirees and war veterans by conducting research to analyze problematic situations and subsequently set MoD social policy.

Research on war veterans and military retirees was carried out by MoD researchers [Polláková et al. in 2013](#), [Černáková et al. in 2019](#), and [Milanová et al. in 2022](#) and focused on: (a) the employment of war veterans and military retirees in the civilian labor market, (b) the socioeconomic situation of war veterans and military retirees, and (c) the health status/health care of war veterans and military retirees.

Changing jobs is a major challenge in everyone's life, all the more so for a professional soldier who has been in the service for decades, or a war veteran who has taken part in a mission. It is therefore necessary to be able to adapt quickly to a new civilian environment where quite different

rules apply. The 2013 survey (Polláková et al., 2013) was conducted among war veterans who are neither active in the Department of Defense, nor retired after leaving the military environment. In terms of employment in the civilian labor market, it points to the fact that most war veterans have found work after leaving the armed forces.

Further research conducted in 2019 (Černáková et al., 2019) among military retirees showed that an overwhelming majority of them found a job after leaving the armed forces, men and women alike, with more than half of the respondents working at the time of the research. In terms of the internal experience of the process of leaving for a civilian environment, it was found that over three-quarters of the respondents did not experience any major stress in the process. However, the degree of experienced stress was differentiated regionally. Military retirees living in the eastern regions of Slovakia (approximately 20%) experienced a great or rather large degree of stress in the process of transition to civilian life, which is probably related to worse job opportunities in these regions.

Research conducted in 2022 (Milanová et al., 2022) among war veterans who were not members of the armed forces showed that the majority were currently working or doing business. Those who are working, or had a job, found employment within 6 months of leaving the armed forces. However, it is important to point out that almost a quarter of war veterans took more than half a year to find a new job. Unemployment lasting more than 12 months can be a burden for the state, but equally a burden for the unemployed person themselves, who after this period, in addition to a reduction in quality of life, may begin to lose work habits.

In the context of preparation for the labor market, we can point to the results of research from 2022, which showed a relatively low awareness of the provision of this service among war veterans (Milanová et al., 2022). Since 2008, the Armed Forces Psychological Service has been providing outgoing professional soldiers with training aimed at transitioning to the civilian labor market, but in the future, it will be necessary to provide them with the opportunity to retrain before leaving the service.

Regarding the socioeconomic situation of war veterans, we will again refer to the results of research carried out by Social Analysis section. Leaving the armed forces may entail a certain risk of a reduction in living standards or a loss of some of the security that the armed forces as an employer represented. Professional soldiers leaving service must face new situations related to finding a new job or integrating into a new civilian environment in general. Research was also focused on the quality of life of war veterans and military retirees after leaving the armed forces. One of the indicators of quality of life is the economic situation and its

subjective evaluation. In a study by Polláková et al. (2013), war veterans were asked to assess the extent to which the amount of their net monthly personal income allows them to cover the cost of living. The answers obtained show that for almost half of the war veterans, their net monthly income was not enough to cover necessary expenses (housing and food) and they had to supplement the money from other sources. According to Polláková et al.'s findings, the financial situation was slightly better for the respondents: war veterans who received a military retirement pension. Respondents were asked to assess the amount of their pension and to compare their economic situation with civilian pensioners. Based on the amount of their pension, the majority of respondents felt that they were slightly better off than civilian retirees (Polláková et al., 2013).

Similarly, research from 2019 by Černáková et al. showed that most military retirees were satisfied with the amount of their retirement pension. Dissatisfaction with the amount of the retirement pension was most often expressed by those who have served fewer years, which, of course, directly affects the amount of the retirement pension (Černáková et al., 2019).

In a 2022 study by Milanová et al., 30% of war veterans stated that their income was sufficient to cover their expenses and they were also able to save. Conversely, a quarter of war veterans found their income insufficient to cover expenses and had to supplement money from other sources. War veterans were the most likely to report experiencing a reduction in their standard of living (38.2%) and financial problems (29.7%) after leaving the service (Milanová et al., 2022). Health and medical conditions are a top priority for every person, and this is even more so for professional soldiers, as this profession is associated with, among other things, great physical and psychological stress. The health care of professional soldiers is provided by departmental medical and recreational establishments. Veterans and modern war veterans may also benefit from this healthcare under specific conditions.

In the same study by Milanová et al. (2022), war veterans were asked to subjectively assess their physical health, which showed that the health of almost half of the war veterans was good enough not to require regular medical care. The research also focused on mapping difficulties related to serving in specific missions. Participants in the UN MS-UNFICYP operation were the most likely to have problems with post-mission adaptation to work at their home unit. Higher alcohol consumption or seeking adrenaline activities were more frequently noted among participants in operations with higher life-threatening risks, including Resolute Support and ISAF in Afghanistan, Iraqi Freedom, and United Nations Disengagement Observer

Force (UNDOF) in the Golan Heights. Psychological problems after returning from the operation were most often suffered by the participants of the Iraqi Freedom operation and relationship breakdown after returning from the operation was most often experienced by war veterans (participants of the UNDOF operation in the Golan Heights). The need to seek the services of a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist after leaving the armed forces was declared by 4% of war veterans (Milanová et al., 2022).

For an indicative comparison with the general civilian population, data from the *Health Yearbook of the Slovak Republic* for 2020 can be used. Here, 364,464 patients were examined in all psychiatric outpatient clinics in Slovakia, which represents approximately 6.7% of the Slovak population (National Centre for Health Information, 2021).

In all available research (Polláková et al., 2013, Černáková et al., 2019, Milanová et al., 2022), war veterans encounter the most problems in the health and social areas. The health area refers to the use and accessibility of health facilities and specialized health care. War veterans reported desire to see a more accommodating approach in the departmental health facilities (e.g., preference over citizens who do not work for the Ministry of Defence more rigorous preventive health check-ups, increased accessibility to spa care, or a reduction in age and seniority criteria).

Public opinion on soldiers serving in foreign missions is also important. Data from a 2019 public opinion poll reported that half of the Slovak population thinks our army should still be involved in foreign missions (Čukan et al., 2019).

## SOCIAL CARE FOR WAR VETERANS

Care for war veterans is dealt with in more detail in the *Concept of Care for War Veterans* (Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2015) and *Care Programs for Professional Soldiers and Their Families* (Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2021).

Care for war veterans is the responsibility of the War Veterans and Military Pensioners Care Unit of the Social Policy Department of the Human Resources Section of the MoD. This department issues war veteran cards, keeps records of war veterans, and provides various benefits and advantages for war veterans after an application for war veteran status has been submitted (Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, 2023b).

Care for war veterans takes several forms and methods. These include, for example, allowances, which are granted only to war veterans who took part in the national liberation

struggle, and specific care, which is granted only to war veterans who took part in foreign military operations. Care for war veterans is regulated in particular by Act No 463/2003 on war veterans. Under the aforementioned legislation the MoD provides care for war veterans as follows: (a) provide examinations and health checks, dispensary care and medical care after returning from military service outside the territory of the Slovak Republic, particularly in medical facilities under the jurisdiction of the Ministry; (b) provide recreational care in recreational facilities of the Ministry; (c) provide spa care in health resorts; and (d) organize events for war veterans and, as decided by the Minister, provides transport for war veterans and their accompanying persons to these events.

In accordance with Act No. 285/2009 on the provision of an allowance to participants in the national struggle for liberation and to widows and widowers of such persons and as amended; (Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2009) war veterans (who took part in the national struggle for liberation) are provided by a pension allowance of EUR 70 per month. Widows and widowers of participants in the national liberation struggle receive a pension allowance of EUR 35 per month.

Most of the forms of care for war veterans are material, but a specific form of care is also their recognition through the award of military decorations and their ceremonial presentation (e.g., the Commemorative Cross of the War Veteran, the Commemorative Medal of the Minister of Defence [1st, 2nd and 3rd class], the Commemorative Medal for the 75th anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising and the end of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, a memorial was unveiled with the names of soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic who died in foreign military operations and peace observation missions in the area of the Háj Nicovô Memorial and War Cemetery near Liptovský Mikuláš. The aim of building the monument was to give moral recognition to the soldiers who died in the performance of their duties outside the territory of the Slovak Republic and to create a place of remembrance in honor of their memory.

MoD further provides war veterans with: (a) discounts on accommodation in facilities of the Department of Defense; (b) discounted admission to museums and cultural institutions under the jurisdiction of higher territorial units; (c) psychological assistance (military psychologists). Psychological care is provided to professional soldiers after completion of their tasks in operations outside the territory of the Slovak Republic. This care is aimed at the prevention of adaptation difficulties, posttraumatic stress disorder, or other psychological disorders, which may have their origin in extreme psychological stress. Psychological support is provided in successive phases, with the first phase starting



immediately after the return from the mission, and the last phase usually starting six months after the return. Psychological care provided by military psychologists is also available to war veterans who are no longer serving in the armed forces.

The MoD is also currently launching a project called “Outreach Workers.” The main aim of which is to help war veterans over age 65 to participate fully in life and to prevent their social exclusion. The project has so far been launched in two regions, but it is planned to be extended to other regions of Slovakia and to younger war veterans.

In accordance with Act No. 171/2018 amending Act No. 463/2003 on war veterans and supplementing Act No. 328/2002 on the social security of police officers and soldiers as amended; a new authorization for the MoD was added to provide war veterans with accommodation with the help of a pension for war veterans. The establishment of guest houses is currently suspended, but the MoD plans to look into this form of support in the future.

The MoD also organizes various cultural and social events for war veterans (e.g., a meeting of the Minister of Defense of the Slovak Republic with modern war veterans, a run in honor of war veterans on the occasion of the International War Veterans’ Day, the tourist event “Veterans’ climb to Ďumbier”).

Nowadays, war veterans can use garrison clubs, which provide cultural, educational, and training activities also for their family members. There are also organizations in Slovakia that associate with and support war veterans, some of whom also work closely with the MoD. We can mention, for example, UN-VETERAN Slovakia, the Military Support Foundation or the Union of Soldiers of the Slovak Republic.

Research from 2022 confirmed that former professional soldiers, including war veterans, continued to show interest in life in the armed forces and in defense and conscription issues of Slovak citizens. They had knowledge and experience that they had the potential to develop in civil-military relations or in cooperation between the armed forces and the public (Milanová et al., 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The main aim of this article was to describe the current state of care for war veterans. On the basis of research conducted by the MoD, we assessed the area of care for war veterans on the basis of three indicators: (a) employment in the civilian labor market, (b) socioeconomic situation of war veterans, and (c) health status/health care of war veterans. Regarding the civilian labor market in general, the majority of war veterans and military retirees had no

problem finding a job in the civilian labor market after leaving the armed forces (Milanová et al., 2022). However, it is important to note that according to research from 2022, it took almost a quarter of war veterans more than half a year to find a new job (Milanová et al., 2022). This fact poses a challenge for the armed forces; in the future they should focus on improving the quality of the preparation for the transitioning to the civilian labor market and also to raise awareness of the possibility of using this support.

Regarding the socioeconomic situation of war veterans, according to research from 2022 (see Milanová et al., 2022), a quarter of war veterans had an income insufficient to cover their expenses and have to supplement their money from other sources. War veterans were the most likely to report experiencing a reduction in their standard of living and financial problems after leaving the service (Milanová et al., 2022). With regard to health care, research confirmed that the health of almost half of the war veterans was good enough not to require regular medical care (Milanová et al., 2022). In all available research, war veterans experienced the most health and social problems. Health involves the use and accessibility of health facilities and specialized health care (e.g., war veterans in the research mentioned expanding the offer of recreational facilities or more targeted health care). War veterans also expressed a relatively high interest in sports activities and club activities. In the future, it will be necessary to provide more support for the club activities of former professional soldiers and, last but not least, to raise awareness of the activities offered to them by the Ministry of Defence (Milanová et al., 2022).

A positive point about the current state of care for ex-servicemen and war veterans is that there are elements of care and efforts to apply them to the target group. In this area, the launch of the Outreach Workers project, whose main task is to provide information and support to war veterans, is good news.

In general, the current situation in the field of care for war veterans and military pensioners can be summarized as a dynamically developing area in which there is still room for improvement. Changes need to be made to the system that not only reflect current support needs, but also prepares for future challenges. There will be a need to respond to the arrival of a new generation of professional soldiers whose needs and care requirements may differ significantly from those of the older generation. Another current trend is the increasing number of women in the army and in missions, which will entail setting up specific support specifically targeted at women. It will also be necessary to establish cooperation with the third sector and non-profit organizations in Slovakia in providing specific support and care for war veterans.

War veterans in the research provided a lot of valuable information and pointed out a number of gaps. All these suggestions can be used by the MoD in the further design of social policy aimed at former professional soldiers.

## NOTE

- 1 The Slovak National Uprising (Slovak: Slovenské národné povstanie, abbreviated SNP), was a military uprising organized by the Slovak resistance movement during World War II.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR NOTE

The majority of the research cited in this article are unpublished, internal materials created by and for the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic. These materials are not public and thus I have provided minimal reference information to these resources in order to substantiate claims. I have access to these materials because I work as a chief state counselor at the social analysis section of human resources department at the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic. Where relevant in my references entries, I have noted which files are internal to the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic.

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