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NAJ OSTANEM ALI ODIDEM? TEORETIČNI MODEL ZADRŽEVANJA KADROV V SLOVENSKI VOJSKI

SHOULD I STAY OR GO? A THEORETICAL MODEL OF PERSONNEL RETENTION IN THE SLOVENIAN ARMED FORCES

Povzetek V okviru projekta »Zadrževanje kadrov v Slovenski vojski« (2024–2025) razvijamo model dejavnikov tveganja in zaščite za zadrževanje kadrov v Slovenski vojski. V članku je predstavljen teoretični model dejavnikov zadrževanja kadrov, ki je nastal kot rezultat obsežne dvostopenjske analize vsebine 223 virov, od tega 191 mednarodnih in 32 slovenskih. Dejavnike smo najprej kodirali in razvrstili v skupine, nato pa smo jih – glede na njihove značilnosti, izvor in učinek – umestili še na socialnoekološke ravni, in sicer na makro, mikro in individualno raven. V članku torej predstavljamo celovit model dejavnikov tveganja in zaščite po socialnoekološkem modelu.

Ključne besede *Zadrževanje kadra, dejavniki tveganja in zaščite, socialnoekološko modeliranje.*

Abstract The project »The Retention of Personnel in the Slovenian Armed Forces« (2024–2025) initially aims to develop a model of risk and protective factors for personnel retention. This article presents a theoretical model of the key retention factors. A two-stage content analysis is used, starting with a comprehensive review of 223 sources, including 191 international and 32 Slovenian sources, using a coding system to group the factors. The second stage categorizes these factors into macro, micro, and individual levels, and in the third stage, a model of the socio-ecological factors influencing retention is developed.

Key words *Personnel retention, risk and protective factors, socio-ecological modelling.*

Uvod¹ Human resources are both a critical asset and a significant risk in organizational security. While new personnel can be beneficial, high turnover rates, unstructured handling of departures, and constant recruitment can pose security challenges and impact organizational effectiveness, including in military institutions. Dedicated, well-trained, long-term members are essential for successful operations and fostering a culture of organizational security behaviours and values. Various research studies in different contexts show positive correlations between employee satisfaction, retention capability, and quality of the organizational performance (Das and Baruah, 2023; Kundu and Gahlawat, 2013). The departure of employees with substantial social capital can severely impact organizational success. Losing key personnel often means losing investments in their development and training, as well as their tacit knowledge and familiarity with organizational protocols, which are crucial for optimal functioning. This can jeopardize the competitive edge and increase organisational vulnerability (Orehek, 2023).

Organisations, including military organisations, aim to create conditions which satisfy external motivational sources (e.g. competitive pay and benefits) and enhance internal motivation through fostering socialisation, values, and respectful relationships. Various interrelated factors influence personnel retention in military organizations. Recruitment and retention are interconnected processes, and it is beneficial to seek mutually supportive solutions (Sminchise, 2016). As long ago as 2007, the NATO Research and Technology Organisation identified certain retention factors which can be categorised as follows: financial (e.g. salary, benefits), socio-economic and psychological (e.g. job mismatch, value discord, low unemployment, misinformation during recruitment), and military-specific (e.g. operational tempo, employment management, job location, promotion systems). In Slovenia too, certain efforts have previously been invested in the question of retention; the ‘Human Factor in the Military System’ project ran between 2004 and 2006 and involved around 2,200 Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF) service members (see also Jelušič and Papler, 2006). This study, which involved soldiers, non-commissioned officers, officers, military staff, and civilians, revealed a great interest in extending temporary employment but raised concerns about pay policies, discrepancies between expected and actual conditions, unstable compensation, disorganized career paths, lack of family support, and indifference towards service members’ personal issues from higher command. It also suggested that adapting to the preference for permanent employment could benefit the SAF. Studies in other countries highlight the importance of work quality, leadership, and quality of life (Snodgrass & Kohlmann, 2014). Research on military-specific risk factors for wellbeing and health in military families (Vuga Beršnak et al., 2022) for the SAF showed that workplace relationships, flexibility, and

¹ In this article, we present a theoretical model developed to effectively carry out the „Retention of Personnel in the Slovenian Armed Forces“ - Zadrževanje kadrov v Slovenski vojski, 2024-2025 (Fakulteta za družbene vede, 2024) project commissioned by the Ministry of Defence and led by Assoc Prof Dr Janja Vuga Beršnak, which deals with the very important issue of personnel leaving the military. The research is based on a mixed method design, where qualitative methods support the development of a measurement tool, and quantitative methods are used to verify the existence and strength of causal relationships.

superior-subordinate relationships are crucial for job satisfaction. Additionally, the family environment plays a significant role in satisfaction and retention.

Understanding the main motivators for employment and enabling personnel to carry out the expected tasks can increase satisfaction and retention in the SAF. A study on young individuals from various profiles (Rosulnik and Vuga Beršnak, 2019) showed that they value using their knowledge effectively, a supportive work environment, cooperation, belonging, independence, income, and social security.

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature and the previously recognised factors which influence employee retention. In the second level of the analysis, we categorised the recognised factors into different sub-categories, and examined whether they originate at the macro, micro or individual level. We then narrowed down our analysis and developed a model of the socio-ecological factors which influence employee retention within the military organisation. To this end, we analysed a total of 223 academic articles, reports, normative documents and other relevant sources, including 191 international and 32 Slovenian sources. We used a coding system to group the factors, as mentioned earlier, and then categorised them into different socio-ecological levels.

Based on the insights gained through this analysis, we conducted a further analysis in the SAF, of: (1) young employees in their first year of employment, (2) those who left the SAF after a relatively short time, and (3) a general sample of the SAF.

1 THE IMPORTANCE OF RETENTION AND STRATEGIES FOR RETAINING EMPLOYEES

In this section, we will present the fundamental characteristics of personnel retention in organisations, addressing issues related to employee turnover and effective management strategies. Employees are the cornerstone of an organisation's operations and development. Their knowledge and competencies contribute significantly to achieving organisational goals. They also independently and collaboratively, especially with leaders, develop innovative solutions and foster a supportive environment and positive working relationships. Consequently, key employees with specific competencies are highly valued within their organisations. However, they are also sought after by competitors in the labour market and have considerable opportunities for job changes. This raises the question of how organisations, in collaboration with human resource management professionals and leaders, can retain these employees and provide a work environment where they can thrive and develop their potential. To answer this question, it is crucial for organisations to build a systematic approach tailored to their specific characteristics and employees and develop a strong employer brand, thus contributing to creating work environments where employees are motivated to stay long-term.

1.1 Retention strategies

Retention strategies refer to broader approaches and philosophies of retention (Cloutier et al., 2015). These strategies encompass key strategic areas such as job design, work processes, rewards, leadership, empowerment, and autonomy, which organisations prioritise to retain employees. They include elements which go beyond mere human resource management. Within the priority areas defined by a retention strategy, we can identify key retention factors which promote the retention of essential employees or employee groups. These strategies and retention factors must be tailored to the target employee groups that the organisation aims to retain, as a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective (Hausknecht et al., 2009). The most important retention factors include the following (Ramlall, 2004; Das and Baruah, 2013): (1) Interesting work and an attractive organisational role; (2) Freedom and autonomy in work; (3) Good relationships with colleagues and superiors; (4) Positive organisational climate and supportive work environment; (5) Recognition of contributions to success; (6) Competitive pay and rewards; (7) Opportunities for advancement and development; (8) A sense of inclusion and collaboration; (9) The organisation's reputation and promising future; (10) Work-life balance; (11) Fairness; (12) Good leadership; (13) Social and environmental responsibility.

1.2 Embeddedness Theory

An important factor contributing to an individual's motivation for long-term engagement and retention in an organisation is the level of their embeddedness. The idea behind embeddedness theory is that the more an employee is embedded in an organisation, the less likely they are to leave (Holtom et al., 2006). Factors of embeddedness include the following (Ibid.): (1) Fit with the organisation, which often includes working conditions, values, and organisational culture. Fit also encompasses alignment with the community, such as the long-term rental or ownership of property, and proximity to work, which reduces transportation costs in terms of both time and money; (2) Links, where the organisation itself contributes to building links, as connections are established with people and projects within the organisation. However, links with the community, such as friends and participation in associations or clubs, are even more important. Although the organisation may not directly influence these external links, it can use mechanisms to encourage the establishment of connections outside the organisation; (3) Sacrifice, which involves considering what an individual would have to give up if they left the organisation. Within the organisation, these sacrifices primarily include benefits, perks, work flexibility, and bonuses which the individual would lose if they changed jobs. In the community, sacrifices might include children's involvement in schools, neighbours and good neighbourly relations, friends, and social activities. The organisation does not directly influence these community factors.

1.3 The Process of Retaining Key Employees

The retention process represents the approach to retaining key personnel and preventing their departure from the organisation. It comprises three sets of activities (Allen et al., 2010):

1. Monitoring turnover and identifying causes: This involves analysing the levels, dynamics, and costs of turnover, both cross-sectionally and over time, using retrospective comparative analysis and forecasting future trends. It also includes identifying dissatisfaction at both the organisational and individual levels, as well as potential turnover;
2. Monitoring global competition and best practices in human resource management: This involves using comparative methods to examine what other organisations are doing, and adapting specific activities to the organisation's own circumstances and the characteristics of its own employees;
3. Special retention plans for top employees: These plans address the causes of dissatisfaction, ensure the presence of factors which retain top talent, and promote appropriate interpersonal relationships. They relate to embeddedness and involve tailoring specific activities to the identified characteristics of employees or employee groups.

1.4 Factors in and Reasons for Employee Turnover

The reasons for leaving an organisation vary greatly among individuals. These reasons can stem from personal traits, values, expectations, abilities, and opportunities to achieve work-related ideas, and from self-image and attitudes towards work and colleagues. Employees may decide to change their work environment to improve their economic situation, seek more personal or professional development, pursue new challenges, implement unfulfilled ideas, or gain greater freedom of expression and autonomous decision-making, as well as for many other reasons (Stare, 2011).

Employee turnover and its causes are well-researched areas in human resource management. A classic analysis of the key factors contributing to voluntary turnover was conducted by Porter and Steers (1973). They divided the factors into four categories:

1. Organisational policies, such as salary policies, reward systems, benefits, and promotion opportunities;
2. Work groups, including group size, relationships with colleagues and superiors, and the level and type of supervision;
3. Job content, referring to job demands and responsibilities, later further defined by Demerouti et al. (2001) and Schaufeli (2017) to include the personal and institutional resources available to the individual; and
4. Individual employee factors, such as age, tenure, education level, and hierarchical position.

Porter and Steers (1973) identified certain factors which had a particularly strong influence on voluntary turnover, including salary level, promotion opportunities, job challenges, relationships with direct superiors and colleagues, and job satisfaction. When these expectations are not met, individuals are more likely to consider changing their work environment. They also noted that role clarity, the quality of feedback on performance, and recognition or praise for work significantly impact turnover.

Building on this analysis, Mobley et al. (1979) developed an applicable turnover model based on the analysis of six types of factors:

1. Demographic and personal factors (age, length of employment, gender, family obligations, education, personality traits);
2. Job satisfaction level;
3. Organisational and work environment factors (salary level, promotion opportunities, supervision, and interpersonal relationships);
4. External environment factors (labour market demand, market salary levels, employability);
5. Factors specific to certain occupational groups, their professionalisation or sector (public servants, professional associations, white-collar/blue-collar workers, etc.); and (6) Personality, organisational commitment, and the level of fulfilled expectations.

Analysis of employee turnover in organisations often covers the main reasons, but these do not capture the whole picture. Stare (2011) suggests a comprehensive analysis of the following factors:

6. Material factors, which impact an individual's financial and material situation;
7. Placement factors, reflecting an individual's perception of their position within the organisation, based on comparisons with others and feelings of inequality and frustration;
8. Organisational factors, including working conditions and processes provided by the organisation, such as promotion, evaluation, and reward systems;
9. Individual factors, relating to an individual's perception of their position within the organisation, including satisfaction with salary, working conditions, opportunities for education and advancement, and relationships;
10. Value systems, where the alignment between organisational and individual values is particularly important; and
11. Job challenges and the employee's involvement in them.

Florjančič et al. (1999) identified the following factors as significantly influencing turnover, so they should be analysed first: poor relationships, limited promotion opportunities, low salaries, poor work organisation, better working conditions outside the organisation, inappropriate work, shift work, and inadequate healthcare.

1.5 Measures to Prevent Employee Turnover

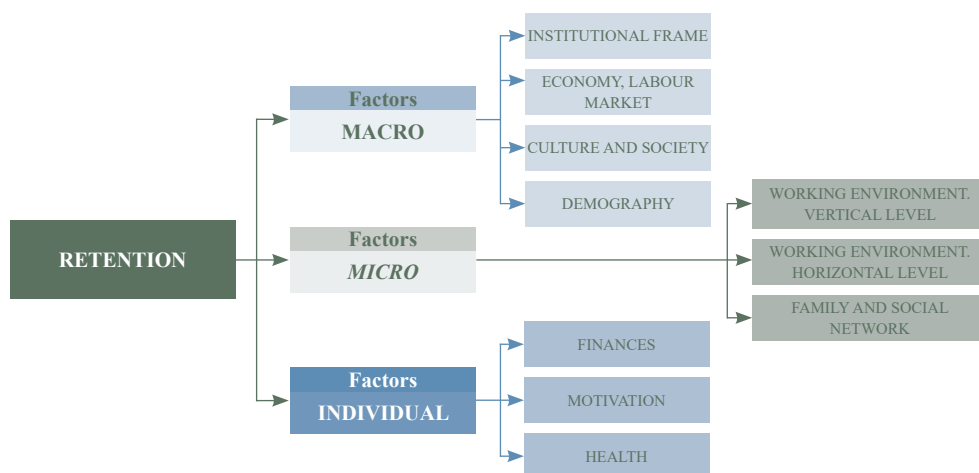
To mitigate the negative effects of turnover, it is crucial to identify and examine its causes. Organisations often use questionnaires to study potential turnover and **exit interviews** to **determine the reasons behind actual turnover**. Additionally, turnover analysis can be conducted through organisation-specific processes, such as annual or quarterly employee reviews, satisfaction surveys, and climate assessments. Continual implementation of these processes is essential, along with adjusting strategies, goals, and activities for managing turnover for different employee groups (Černe and Kaše, 2023), thus concurrently measuring and managing turnover (Morrell et al., 2004). Neal (1989) proposed a three-stage programme for managing turnover: (1) collecting and analysing data on turnover patterns; (2) identifying turnover factors through structured exit interviews; and (3) implementing measures to address the main causes of turnover.

Organisations should develop a concrete plan or comprehensive retention strategy based on turnover analysis and dissatisfaction factors, **especially for key employee groups**. Beyond understanding and managing turnover, it is vital that retention strategies align with the organisation's long-term development goals. Comparative analyses of organisations with effective retention strategies can be beneficial. Engaging a wide range of employees in developing retention practices ensures solutions are well-suited to the organisation and meet employee expectations.

2 A THEORETICAL MODEL OF FACTORS INFLUENCING EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Based on insights from both Slovenian and international contexts which extend beyond the work environment of military organisations, **we have developed a model** to comprehensively connect various risk and support factors (Figure 1). In this model, the factors influencing employee retention are divided into three socio-ecological levels (Figure 1): (i) the **individual level**, which includes financial circumstances and capabilities, personal motivation, physical and mental health, and other potential specifics; (ii) the **micro level**, where the factors stem from the vertical work environment, the horizontal work environment, and the individual's family and broader social network; and (iii) the **macro level**, which comprises structural factors over which the individual may not have direct control, but which are nonetheless significant. These include economic factors, such as the labour market, socio-cultural factors, demographic factors, and the institutional framework.

Figure 1:
Theoretical
Model



2.1 Factors Influencing Retention in Military Organisations at the Macro Socio-Ecological Level

2.1.1 Institutional Framework

The institutional framework impacts the retention of personnel in the SAF through its legal and political structures. This framework includes laws and regulations which define the service conditions, rights, and obligations of military personnel. Key elements include compensation provisions, incentives, welfare measures, military training, and education regulations. Effective implementation of these policies by government oversight bodies and military command structures is crucial for meeting the needs of military staff and determining their decision to continue or leave the service. For example, **policies on career progression** and professional development ensure that personnel see a clear pathway for growth within the military, which can enhance their commitment and reduce turnover. Additionally, **welfare measures** which address the health and well-being of personnel and their families can significantly affect retention, as they provide a sense of security and support which may not be as readily available in civilian employment.

Labour Legislation

Labour law governs the relationships between workers and employers, encompassing protective norms in each country. Slovenian labour legislation includes the Employment Relationships Act (ZDR-1), regulations on tax treatment of work-related expenses, sector-specific laws (the Defence Act, the Public Sector Act, the Service in the Slovenian Armed Forces Act), and collective agreements at various levels.

The ZDR-1 is central, regulating the employment contracts, rights, obligations, and protections of workers, and trade union activities. Protective factors derived from this law include basic rights such as fair compensation, safe working conditions, personal data protection, and the right to education and severance pay. Additionally, the law addresses restrictions like the right of parents to refuse overtime or night work under certain conditions, posing challenges for the organization of military work (see *Osnove delovnopravne zakonodaje*). For instance, the provision which allows parents to refuse overtime can impact the scheduling flexibility of military operations. Conversely, the comprehensive coverage of workers' rights under Slovenian labour law ensures that military personnel receive similar protections to their civilian counterparts, since they fall under the provisions of the Public Employees Act (ZJU) and the Public Sector Salary System Act (ZSPJS).

Legislation Specific to the Slovenian Armed Forces

The Defence Act (ZObr) defines the type, organization, and scope of national defence, including the duties and rights of citizens in defence, military education and training, readiness, and specific powers in security situations. The Service in the Slovenian Armed Forces Act (ZSSloV) outlines the principles of military service, the special rights and obligations of military personnel, career conditions, and measures to maintain operational readiness. Amendments introduced in 2023 allow soldiers to be employed with only primary school education (which finishes at 14 years of age in Slovenia), provided they commit to further education. The Act also addresses pay, benefits, and post-retirement employment, with measures to support soldiers' families, such as housing assistance and educational opportunities for dependents. For example, housing assistance can significantly reduce the financial burden on military families, making the profession more sustainable and appealing in the long term.

In view of the personnel problems faced by the SAF, it would be useful to consider relaxing the legislation that prohibits service for various categories of the population in Slovenian society (e.g. people with long-term residency who do not have full citizenship, people with dual citizenship, etc.).

In 2023, two developmental documents were adopted: the Resolution on the General Long-term Programme for the Development and Equipping of the Slovenian Armed Forces until 2040 (ReDPROSV40) and the Mid-term Defence Programme of the Republic of Slovenia 2023-2028 (SOPR), which partially derives from it. These documents *inter alia* prioritise human resources, highlighting the importance of accelerating the recruitment and retention of personnel in the SAF.

Slovenia continues to adhere to the Military Service Act (ZVojD). According to this law, male citizens are required to carry out military duties in both peacetime and wartime. Since 2003, Section VIIa of the Act has effectively abolished the conscription system for filling the ranks. However, military records, which include

enlisted conscripts, are still maintained during peacetime; conscripts are entered into the military records in the year they turn 17. The military obligation only applies to the male population, **which constitutes gender discrimination**. This issue is not merely **systemic sexism** but also has practical implications and poses a risk factor for recruitment, since half of the population is uninformed about military service.

2.1.2 Socio-Cultural Factors

Employee retention in the armed forces is influenced by a multitude of factors, among which cultural aspects play a significant role. These include societal values, traditions, gender roles, and attitudes towards military service. Public perception of the military, the prestige associated with serving, and the alignment of military values with broader cultural values are crucial. Additionally, the internal culture of the military, including its approach to diversity and inclusion, and the integration of various ethnic and social groups, is essential for achieving personnel satisfaction and retention.

Culture can be understood in terms of scripts and schemas, collective programming, and social memory, which shape how people think, act, and behave, and are rooted in experiences transmitted across generations (Hofstede, 1991; House et al., 2004; Triandis, 1994). Wiersema and Bird (1993) used Hofstede's framework to develop a model explaining how demographic variables predict executive turnover in national cultures. For example, their study of Japanese managers found that socio-cultural values such as collectivism and stratification influence turnover by shaping social dynamics. Similarly, Chiu et al. (2001) found that UK workers stereotyped older workers as less adaptable to change more often than Hong Kong workers, with these stereotypes linked to higher turnover among older employees. Furthermore, Yao and Wang (2006) found that collectivism strengthened the positive effects of normative commitment on retention, suggesting that certain types of commitment may have a greater impact on employee retention in collectivist cultures. König et al. (2011) studied the role of uncertainty avoidance in the turnover process, and found that the links between job insecurity and turnover intentions were stronger in a low uncertainty avoidance country (USA) than in a **high uncertainty avoidance country** (Switzerland; also Slovenia). Research indicates that workload is more strongly associated with job stress and turnover intentions in **individualistic countries than in collectivist ones**. Yang et al. (2012) found that job stress significantly predicted organisational withdrawal in individualistic cultures. Stavrou and Kilaniotis (2010) discovered that **flexible work arrangements** had different effects in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic cultures, with part-time work arrangements linked to higher turnover in Anglo-Saxon cultures but lower turnover in Nordic ones.

Zimmerman et al. (2009) found that Western human resources policies were less effective in promoting employee retention in China than Asian human resources practices. It has been shown time and time again that **understanding culture is critical to developing human resources strategies and retaining employees**.

Other studies have examined national culture outside Hofstede's and Triandis's theoretical frameworks. For example, research has explored the impact of **culturally diverse work teams on member retention**, finding that diverse teams had significantly higher turnover (Ng and Tung, 1998). Cohen and Kirchmeyer (2005) studied how work and non-work factors influenced turnover across religious cultures, finding significant differences between Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Reiche (2009) explored turnover among local staff in multinational subsidiaries, concluding that **organisational identification is a key mechanism for overcoming cross-cultural differences**. Indeed, military culture as such plays an important role in international operations and missions, as it helps to overcome differences between nations and reinforces joint efforts to achieve the objectives of missions (especially within NATO militaries, which have a common military culture).

In Slovenia, the impact of culture on employee retention remains under-researched. However, Vuga Beršnak (2014; 2021) studied security culture within Hofstede's framework, identifying high levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance, a feminine orientation, and collectivism in Slovenian culture. Public opinion surveys in Slovenia show a strong aversion to risk (Vuga Beršnak, 2021). Slovenian public opinion is supportive of military tasks that contribute to national social welfare and humanitarian missions, but strongly opposes risk, with 70% of the population favouring the withdrawal of troops in case of casualties (Vuga Beršnak, 2014). This risk-averse culture, termed the **"security bubble,"** reflects societal rejection of risk in international operations and missions (Vuga Beršnak, 2021) and also in other contexts.

Further studies, such as the Slovenian Public Opinion surveys, have measured values, public attitudes towards national and international security, the Slovenian Armed Forces, and the military profession, all of which can influence retention (Jelušič et al., 2005; Malešič et al., 2007; Malešič et al., 2009; Malešič et al., 2012). Research by Vuga Beršnak et al. (2019–2023) has also examined the differences in everyday life between civilian and military patterns, the stereotypical perceptions of the military and their families, and differences in intimate partnerships and family relations. Malešič et al. (2015) argued that the SAF needs to **converge civilian and military values to maintain legitimacy**, noting that public trust in the military is higher than in most other political institutions due to the high fulfilment of the social imperative.

2.1.3 Demographic Factors

Global demographic changes, such as ageing populations, impact workforce composition and retention. In Slovenia, the average age is increasing, with a significant portion of the population over 65 (European Commission, 2023). Lambert et al. (2012) and Bjelland et al. (2012) note that demographic factors (length of employment, age, and income) significantly influence turnover. Similarly, employee retention theory supports the **connection between demographic factors and employee retention** (Mitchell et al., 2001; Bibi et al., 2016; Walsh and Baritkowski,

2013). Managing multi-generational workforces and addressing the specific **needs of different age groups** are critical (Rani and Samuel, 2016). Younger employees are more likely to seek new job opportunities than older employees, influencing turnover rates (Monks, 2012; Okun et al., 2013; Gibson and Sodeman, 2014). For example, **younger** personnel may prioritise **career development and diverse experiences**, leading them to explore opportunities outside the military if their needs are not being met. Job changes are more frequent in younger age groups, with those under 35 more likely to seek new opportunities and challenges. Lopina et al. (2012) found that 33% of the studied workforce population from Generation Y (aged 18–34) voluntarily left their jobs within six months. On the other hand, **older** personnel may value **job stability and benefits** more, making them less likely to leave. Understanding these generational preferences and **tailoring retention strategies** accordingly can significantly enhance retention. For instance, offering flexible career paths and continuous professional development opportunities can attract and retain younger employees, while robust retirement benefits and recognition programmes can appeal to older staff (Okun et al., 2013; Gibson and Sodeman, 2014).

Demographic factors significantly influence armed forces and security (e.g. Libicki et al., 2011). In this section, we observe some different results in relation to gender and job satisfaction. In the USA, Buddin (2005) found that at the beginning of their service, female personnel are 19% less likely to remain employed. Similarly, Putka and Strickland (2005) reported that attrition rates for women were 43% to 113% higher than for men at various stages up to the 48th month of service. Larson et al. (2002) found that women are 44% more likely to leave within the first year of service. In Canada, however, authors found minimal differences between men and women with regard to their intentions to leave the military. Where differences were noted, women were more satisfied with individual combat training standards, the impact of deployments on family, pay and benefits, and organisational leadership than men (Cheng et al., 2020, in CAF Retention Strategy, 2022). Age is also a significant predictor of attrition, with younger personnel more likely to leave than older members (e.g. Price and Kim, 1993; Hoglin and Barton, 2015; Perry et al., 1991). Vesterling et al. (2015) found that early-career personnel are particularly prone to leaving military service after deployments. In a study on US Air Force retention (Robbert et al., 2022), marital status and the number of children were influential demographic factors, with married personnel and those with children showing lower attrition rates. The same study (Ibid., pp 17–18) revealed that gender and race also play a role, with men staying longer than women, and black personnel staying longer than white personnel. Kopač (2006b, p 111) found that age and education level affect interest in extending employment in the SAF. Age positively correlates with interest in extending employment, while higher education levels correlate with decreased interest (Ibid.).

Broader demographic trends also affect Slovenia and its armed forces. Močnik (2018, p. 92) noted years ago that Slovenia faces a significant demographic deficit. The demographic data still supports this observation. One of the most sensible

responses, he suggests, would be to **sequentially allocate human resources within the Slovenian national security sector**. This approach would make the SAF a more reliable and attractive employer (Ibid.).

2.1.4 Economic Factors

Economic theories on employment decisions in the armed forces emphasise macro-level factors, focusing on the resources for acquiring and retaining human resources in the military, the economic conditions, salaries, and employment opportunities in both the military and civilian sectors (Kopač, 2006a; Kopač, 2006b; Kopač, 2012, p 1002; Hartley, 2011). Economic factors, including pay, benefits, and job security, are pivotal in retention (Tresch and Leuprecht, 2010, p 4; see also Lakhani, 1988; Francois, 2020). Military compensation must be competitive with civilian opportunities to retain personnel. Economic theories and models, such as those developed by the RAND Corporation, highlight the relationship between military compensation and retention (e.g. Gotz and McCall, 1984; Warner and Asch, 1995; Asch and Warner, 2001a, 2001b; Goldberg, 2001; Hosek et al., 2007; Tong et al., 2021; Mattock and Asch, 2023). Increased financial incentives can significantly boost retention rates, particularly among younger personnel at the beginning of their careers. For instance, studies have shown that a 10% increase in total compensation can lead to a substantial rise in retention rates among early-career personnel (Warner, 2012). Additionally, the job security provided by military service is a significant retention factor, especially in uncertain economic climates. When the civilian job market is volatile, the stability offered by a military career becomes more attractive. However, during periods of economic growth, the military must enhance its compensation packages and career development opportunities to remain competitive with the private sector.

Kopač (2006a) observed nearly two decades ago that the size of the population aged 20-24 has the greatest impact on the number of candidates for employment in the SAF. He predicted that due to decreasing unemployment and increasing salaries in the civilian sector, it would be necessary to **attract personnel primarily through a more appropriate salary policy**, along with other benefits, and effective advertising. Additionally, the effect of a declining youth population was noted. Kopač (2006b, p 114) also found, from a study on the retention of permanent SAF personnel, that there was significant interest in renewing employment contracts among military personnel. However, he warned that a large portion of the military workforce would be willing to leave the SAF for better offers and higher pay in the civilian sector.

Defence expenditure, which includes funding for the defence system (the administrative section of the Ministry of Defence and the SAF), resources for the annual acquisition plans, and military pensions, undoubtedly affects the ability to retain personnel (GOV.SI). Since 2015, defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP has been increasing annually. According to the approved budgets for 2024 and 2025, defence expenditure is projected to be 1.31% of GDP for 2024 and 1.36% of GDP for 2025, while the revised 2023 budget set it at 1.33% of GDP (GOV.SI).

2.2 Factors Influencing Retention in Military Organisations at the Micro Socio-Ecological Level

2.2.1 Work Environment

Zajec (2009, p 5) divided the work environment into the physical work environment, the organisational culture, and the organisational climate, noting that it “reflects the values, virtues, culture, and mission of the organization”, and influences employee satisfaction. Similar distinctions are found in the international literature. Burr et al. (2022) defined the work environment as a combination of the physical and psychosocial environments. Briner (2000, p 299) further categorised it as including physical conditions (e.g. heat, equipment), job characteristics (e.g. workload, task difficulty), broader organisational attributes (e.g. culture, history), and even external factors (e.g. local labour market conditions, the industry sector, work-home relationships).

2.2.2 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is one of the most extensively studied concepts in organisational theory. In the field of work psychology, job satisfaction is present in 70% of all articles, despite the increased focus on work commitment since the late 19th century (Judge et al., 2017, p 357). Simply put, job satisfaction refers to workers’ general evaluative judgments about their work (Weiss, 2002). Research in defence studies indicates that job satisfaction significantly reduces the likelihood of leaving military service before retirement (Etheridge, 1989; Pierce, 1998; Price and Kim, 1993). Generally, military personnel report lower job satisfaction than civilians (Blair and Phillips, 1983; Fredland and Little, 1983; Woodruff and Conway, 1990). However, job satisfaction is often not the only or even the primary variable. Models frequently position job satisfaction as an intermediary variable between job-related, organisational, and individual factors, and the intention to remain in service (Bogg and Cooper, 1995; Haar et al., 2014; Kim et al., 1996; Proyer et al., 2012; Sy et al., 2006).

In terms of satisfaction factors, the Slovenian study “Military-Specific Risk Factors for the Well-being and Health of Military Families” (Vuga Beršnak et al., 2022) highlighted the work environment; specifically **workplace relationships, flexibility, and the relationship between commanders and subordinates**. The work environment directly affects an individual’s well-being, motivation, and productivity. Employees spend a significant portion of their lives at work, and the environment, relationships, and culture there greatly influence their overall happiness and professional fulfilment.

2.2.3 The Individual and the Work Environment

Dawis and Lofquist (1984) highlighted the role of individuals in relation to the work environment; they conceptualised work as an interaction between the individual and the work environment. The core of their theory is the concept of person-environment fit, emphasising the importance of aligning individual needs with the opportunities

provided by the work environment. The work environment is viewed as a dynamic entity characterised by various factors, including job demands, organisational culture, rewards, and growth opportunities. For instance, an environment that offers clear expectations, meaningful tasks, and skill development opportunities is likely to be perceived as more supportive and conducive to adjustment. According to Holland's (1963) theory of personality-job fit, job satisfaction requires congruence between job characteristics and personality types.

2.2.4 Psychological Aspects of the Employee-Work Environment Relationship

The relationship between employees and the organisation is contractual, defining the duties and rights of both parties. However, the expectations employees have with regard to the interpretation and execution of this contract are also significant. This is known as the "psychological contract" (Argyris, 1960). It explains workforce behaviour related to employment and departure. It deals with the unwritten expectations and obligations between employers and employees in the workplace. These psychological contracts are not explicitly stated in formal agreements, but are implicit agreements shaping mutual expectations, perceptions, and commitments between the parties. They are defined as "individuals' beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between them and their organizations" (Rousseau, 1995, p 9). Due to employees' expectations of reciprocal obligations from employers, these can be seen as the psychological basis of the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995; Shore and Tetrick, 1994). They develop at the start of the employment relationship through interactions with human resources and organisational representatives. As employees gain experience within the organisation, their expectations adapt to the realities.

2.2.5 Risk Factors Related to the Work Environment

Workplace Stress

Studies indicate that higher levels of workplace stress are associated with lower levels of job satisfaction (Cummins, 1990; Landsbergis, 1988). **Military personnel and their families face unique challenges** such as frequent relocations, the possibility of deployment, the risk of injury or death during duty, separation from extended family due to geographical distance, relatively modest income, and often having more children in their households (Hunter, 1982, in Black, 1993). Sanchez et al. (2004) found that workplace pressure was a significant predictor of dissatisfaction. The primary indicators of job satisfaction were the perceived level of work pressure and the belief that the most significant challenges in their lives stemmed from work-related factors (such as superiors) rather than non-work-related issues (such as health or family). Individuals experiencing increased workplace pressure reported lower job satisfaction. Dobbs and Do (2019) identified organisational cynicism as a key factor in employee turnover in the military, describing it as a "key factor in burnout and emotional exhaustion" and noting its direct impact on reducing "commitment and

effectiveness.” Their findings highlight a direct link between toxic leadership and organisational cynicism. Individuals who perceive their leaders as having toxic traits hold more negative views of their organisation, with self-promotion being identified as the primary toxic leadership style. Cynicism arises from perceived breaches of commitments to employees, unmet expectations, or observations of such breaches experienced by others (Dobbs and Do, 2019). The work atmosphere can become toxic when leaders’ personal values override the needs of the military and its soldiers (LaFalce, 2017). Doty and Fenlason (2013) reported that in an American study, 80% of the surveyed soldiers had encountered toxic leaders, and 20% had worked for them.

Gender and Inequality

Job satisfaction is also negatively impacted by gender bias and sexual harassment. Women facing gender discrimination show a slight tendency to seek new employment opportunities, while men are more strongly influenced by experiences of sexual harassment when considering job changes. The frequency, rather than the severity, of gender bias incidents is crucial in determining job dissatisfaction and turnover intentions (Antecol et al., 2009). A meta-analysis of sexual harassment literature revealed that the consequences of such actions vary depending on the source of the harassment. Dissatisfaction with coworkers was more strongly associated with experiences of sexual harassment than dissatisfaction with superiors (Willness et al., 2007).

Family-related issues also show differences between men and women, as noted by Dichter and True (2015). In their qualitative study of female veterans, most reported leaving military service earlier than planned or desired, primarily due to gender-related experiences. A study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019) found that separation from family and friends and work-family conflict were among the top five reasons for job termination, cited by 20% of departing personnel. These issues were comparable in prevalence to dissatisfaction with working conditions, and slightly less common than concerns about lack of advancement/recognition and deployment.

Sims et al. (2005), in a study of 11,521 female military personnel over four years, examined employee turnover in the military in relation to sexual harassment. They confirmed that sexual harassment adversely affects employees, leading to decreased job satisfaction and attachment, and increased intentions to leave the military. Even when accounting for mediating factors such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and marital status, harassment experiences remained linked to increased turnover. Increased commitment to an organisation with a clear anti-harassment policy was also confirmed in a study of 14,000 soldiers in the United States (Williams et al., 1999).

2.2.6 Supportive Factors Related to the Work Environment

Encouraging Work Environment

A supportive and encouraging work environment is a key factor in employee retention (Richman et al., 2008). De Vos et al. (2003) highlighted organisational promises that attract and retain employees, including professional development opportunities, challenging tasks, and a supportive social environment at work. A 2023 study of the U.S. Army identified job instability and lack of planning (26.5%), unfair promotion practices (21.5%), morale (20.6%), and flexibility to pursue personal goals (19%) as top reasons for leaving (Vie et al., 2023, p 14). Conversely, performing duties that are personally meaningful is linked to overall job satisfaction and life satisfaction (Zurcher, 1977).

Organisational support is also emphasised by Allen et al. (2003) as a critical factor in retaining employees. They found that a positive perception of human resource practices enhances the perception of organisational support, which leads to greater emotional attachment to the organisation. Employees with a positive perception of organisational support are less likely to leave their jobs. Walker (2001) identified seven factors which primarily promote employee retention: challenging work, learning opportunities, positive relationships with colleagues, pay and recognition, acknowledgment of abilities, work-life balance, and effective communication.

The findings are supported by Organisational Support Theory and Social Support Theory, which suggest that organisational support builds employees' emotional commitment and strengthens their emotional connection to the organisation (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2001), thereby increasing retention (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Inclusive environments which accept sexual orientation and gender identity are positively associated with mental health, well-being, and productivity among LGBT individuals, benefitting morale, cohesion, and retention (Polchar et al., 2014).

Effective Leadership

A positive relationship with superiors (commanders in the military) is inversely related to employee turnover. The extent to which employees believe their organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being is inversely proportional to voluntary departure (Randall, 2006). Randall tested the leadership abilities of superiors and their correlation with soldiers' intentions to remain in military service, finding a positive correlation for each of the 23 leadership abilities included. He emphasised that leadership is a skill that can be developed and learned. The **quality of military leadership** is invaluable for employee retention, and leadership development programmes play a significant role (Pickett, 2023, p 3).

Equality and Cohesion

Perceptions of equal opportunities are also crucial in the workplace environment. Walsh et al. (2010) found that a positive psychological climate of equal opportunities directly contributes to higher job satisfaction among soldiers. This indicates that a more positive perception of the equal opportunity climate is linked to lower job stress and higher job satisfaction. Additionally, a positive climate of equal opportunities within a unit is associated with increased unit cohesion (Walsh et al., 2010).

The importance of cohesion is also confirmed by Lancaster et al. (2013), who studied factors influencing the likelihood of male and female employees continuing their service in the National Guard after combat deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. They found that perceived support within the unit was the best predictor of the intention to return or stay in the military, regardless of gender.

Work-Life Balance

In their study of military organisations, Dupré and Day (2007; see also Vest, 2014) found that employees who received support from the organisation and their superiors in balancing work and personal life, had encouraging work, and understood their job requirements reported fewer health symptoms and intentions to leave the organisation. Furthermore, employees who experienced higher job satisfaction reported better health and fewer intentions to move to another organisation.

2.2.7 Family

Family Well-being

Family well-being is a significant factor for individuals considering entry into or continuation of military service (Keller et al., 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2019). Family support influences a soldier's retention, readiness, morale, and motivation (Schneider and Martin, 1994). Conversely, family issues can detract from a service member's focus and readiness for missions, incurring costs due to legal, health, mental, or financial problems (Committee on the Assessment of the Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and Their Families et al., 2013; Lubens and Bruckner, 2018).

Studies in the SAF (Vuga Beršnak et al., 2022) have shown that support from the spouse and the family as a whole is very important, as it represents the backbone for the service members. Family support is high in Slovenian military families, even during deployments, despite the negative impact that military demands have on children (e.g. frequent parental absences) and spouses (e.g. giving up career, taking care of household and family to support the soldier's professional obligations, etc.).

U.S. military services emphasise the importance of family well-being and satisfaction, treating family members as integral partners in the military lifestyle. There is a prevailing perception in the U.S. that it is the military's responsibility to create an environment where families can thrive and realise their potential (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2019, p. 28).

Family issues can hinder the ability of service members to relocate or remain on deployment (Keller et al., 2018; Sims et al., 2017). According to a 2002 U.S. Department of Defense study on active-duty personnel behaviour related to health, job stress was highest among married service members living apart from their spouses, significantly impacting mental health and job performance (Hourani et al., 2006).

The U.S. Department of Defense's guidelines on family readiness emphasise that "family well-being contributes to retention, resilience, readiness, and quality of life" (Under-Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, 2021, Section 4). The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al. (2019, p 64) conclude that the well-being of soldiers and their families is linked to retention rates. They also note that every soldier, including those not married, is part of some family structure and needs informal support systems to fulfil military duties.

Support networks (safety net), including family and friends, positively impact job satisfaction (Castaneda et al., 2009; Griffith, 2005). A study of military partners found that 93% of soldiers remain in service if supported by their partner, compared to only 44% without such support (Office of People Analytics, 2017). Some studies identify partner support as a critical factor in retention (Bowen, 1986; Etheridge, 1989; Kirby and Naftel, 2000; Pittman and Orthner, 1988).

Family Stressors and Dissatisfaction

Frequent absences and relocations are significant stressors affecting family satisfaction (Etheridge, 1989). A U.S. Department of Defense study showed that partner support decreases with increased frequency and duration of absences (Office of People Analytics, 2019). Higher levels of marital satisfaction and family support increase the likelihood of continued military service, while financial stress reduces partner support (Office of People Analytics, 2019). Work-family conflict lowers job satisfaction (Street et al., 2022).

Woodall et al. (2023) tested the impact of family factors on soldiers' decisions to leave service, analysing over 4,500 soldier-partner pairs. They evaluated family satisfaction and work-family conflict as mediators affecting service exit decisions. The results indicated that financial difficulties, the number of children, and partner absences increased the likelihood of leaving service due to work-family conflict and reduced job satisfaction. **Employees with spouses reporting higher social support were significantly less likely to voluntarily leave service.**

Orthner (1990) identified spousal support, spousal employment, family life cycle, family economy, and family career decision-making processes as key factors supporting military employment retention. Sanchez et al. (2004, p. 32) highlighted the importance of positive personal events. Their study found that military personnel experiencing more positive life changes in the previous year were generally less satisfied with their job, suggesting that even beneficial life events can cause stress, especially if they conflict with military duties.

Rosen and Durand (1995) found higher military commitment among married personnel, with spouse attitudes significantly impacting service retention decisions. Their longitudinal analysis of data from over 1,200 military spouses showed that rank, years of service, and spouse expectations predicted younger spouses' decisions to leave the military. Compatibility with family life was a crucial predictor for mid-level NCO spouses. Effective and rapid adjustment to military life is vital for family readiness, reducing dropout rates and enhancing the retention of quality personnel (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2019, p 125).

Military family challenges **also affect parents, siblings, friends, and other family members**, with concerns such as separation due to deployment, safety worries, childcare, and care of elders (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2019, p 168).

Family Resilience

Family resilience is a critical factor influencing service, characterised by demographic, cultural, economic, and social variables (Southwick et al., 2014). Factors affecting family resilience include value systems, communication, problem-solving methods, and family support systems (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2019). However, Bonanno et al. (2015) emphasised that no single factor is solely responsible for resilience.

2.3 Factors Influencing Retention in Military Organisations at the Individual Socio-Ecological Level

In this section, we will explore factors emerging from or impacting individuals at the personal level. Based on recent findings from the Slovenian study “Military-Specific Risk Factors for the Well-being and Health of Military Families” (Vuga Beršnak, 2020; 2022), we will analyse the importance and influence of individual factors, including financial factors, motivation, and physical and mental health.

2.3.1 Financial Factors

Military Benefits as a Management Tool

Military benefits are a crucial strategic resource for managing human capital. The effectiveness of the reward system depends on its continual adaptation to changes within the military and its operational environment (Asch, 2019, p 2). Military benefits aim to achieve several human resource goals. Firstly, they should provide **appropriate incentives for individuals to invest effort in career advancement**. Secondly, benefits should aid in effectively allocating personnel to **positions where they are most suited. The system should prevent behaviours such as “climbing” (seeking positions beyond one’s qualifications) and “slumming” (settling for positions below one’s abilities)**. Thirdly, **reward policies** must ensure personnel **remain in the organisation long enough to recoup training costs and meet staffing needs** for mid- and senior-level positions (Asch, 2019, p 2).

The US Department of Defense (2018a; 2018b) emphasises that military **benefits** should uphold the **perception of military service as dignified, respected, desirable, and honourable**. The document mentions the emotional and spiritual fulfilment derived from dedicated service in uniform, and highlights patriotism as an important but insufficient motivator for a military career. Financial benefits must complement these motivations. Other principles of military benefits include their efficiency and success in both peace and war, predictability and transparency, fairness, and sufficient flexibility to adapt to technological and tactical changes, supply and demand, and the military operating environment (Asch, 2019, p 3).

Asch (2019) suggested considering four main categories when evaluating the effectiveness of the military pay system: (1) Determining the Level of Military Pay and Pay Increases: What level of military pay is necessary for competitiveness? (2) Structuring the Military Pay Table: How should military pay be structured across different ranks and within them? (3) Special and Incentive Payments: What proportion of funds should be allocated to basic pay received by all personnel, and what proportion to special and incentive payments? (4) Deferred Compensation and Military Retirement: The purpose and effectiveness of the retirement system.

Military Benefits and the Organisational Structure

Research indicates that the pay structure in a hierarchical organisation such as the military should ensure that promotions to higher ranks are rewarded with higher pay grades (Asch and Warner, 2001; Bognanno, 2001; Rosen, 1986). The military needs such a pay structure for three talent management-related reasons: firstly, higher pay increases at higher ranks provide incentives for lower-ranked personnel to perform well, as those who excel are more likely to reach these higher grades and receive higher pay; secondly, since more talented personnel are more likely to be promoted, a skewed pay structure motivates them to remain in the military and continue their dedicated work; and thirdly, such a pay structure addresses a key

feature of the military promotion system, where incentives for performance decrease with rank advancement (Asch, 2019, p 2). Asch (2019, p 2) highlights the potential need to adjust the pay scale structure to create stronger performance incentives. The possibility of using performance-based pay within pay grades, including a pay scale that incorporates time in the grade, should be explored.

Benefits and Relationship with the Civilian Sector

Warner (2012) reviewed the existing literature on military recruitment and retention and identified key factors that influence these, including policies related to military benefits. He found that recruitment and retention depend on the level of military pay compared to civilian sector pay opportunities. A 10% increase in current and future military benefits is estimated to increase the supply of high-quality candidates by 6–11%, and is projected to boost retention for the first term (3–6 years of service) by 15–20%, the second term (7–10 years) by about 10–13%, and the third term (11–14 years) by about 5% (Warner, 2012, p 71). **Income levels have the greatest impact on young employees at the start of their careers**, while **other motivators** become more **significant over time**, reducing the importance of money. After several years of service and numerous promotions, income improves to the point where further increases are no longer a key retention factor.

Comparing military and civilian benefits is challenging due to the different nature of work in the two sectors. Quantifying these differences in pay is complex, suggesting a need for compensation packages tailored to the unique aspects of military life (Murray and the Congressional Budget Office, 2007, p 2).

Economic conditions also influence military recruitment and retention. Studies show that a **10% decrease in civilian unemployment can reduce the pool of high-quality recruits by 2–4%**. Economic crises, such as that of 2008, positively impacted recruitment and retention, leading to fewer recruitment bonuses. As economic conditions improve, this positive trend is expected to weaken (Warner, 2012, p 72).

Examining differences between military and civilian benefits alone cannot independently determine whether military benefits are set at the optimal level. Other factors, including trends and expectations with regard to military recruitment and retention, civilian sector unemployment, political dynamics such as war conditions or conflict potential, and forecasts on the frequency and duration of force deployments, are also important (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, 2012, p xvii).

Quality of New Hires

Increased military benefits are associated with a higher number of quality candidate applications (Asch et al., 2007). Hosek et al. (2018) found that the quality of new hires in the U.S. is positively correlated with the ratio of pay and benefits for the navy and the air force, but not for the army. The different result for the army is attributed to the challenges of recruiting during extensive deployments in support of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2000, with insufficient recruitment funding adjustments.

A 2004 UK Royal Air Force study on military exits cited job dissatisfaction and low future work motivation, family issues and alienation, and better employment opportunities outside the air force (Grigorov, 2020, p 28). In response to pilot shortages, the UK implemented a programme to reimburse civilian aviation licence training costs, but it revealed “deeper motivational issues related to quality of life, flight opportunities, pay, job satisfaction, and job security”. Additional financial retention incentives for pilots were introduced as a short-term measure (Grigorov, 2020, p 28). Despite these efforts, a 2018 Ministry of Defence survey revealed concerning dissatisfaction levels among personnel, with only 40% expressing satisfaction and 35% complete dissatisfaction, while morale in military formations noticeably declined (UK Ministry of Defence, 2018).

In the light of changing attitudes towards the military, the UK began presenting the military profession as a way to acquire valuable skills, such as teamwork, leadership, and perseverance, rather than merely a patriotic duty. This approach could benefit all European armed forces facing strong labour market competition (Acquarelli et al., 2022, p 9).

Special Payments and Incentives

Special and incentive payments, including one-off or recurring monthly payments and bonuses, as well as non-monetary incentives, are flexible tools that the military uses to address personnel needs that cannot be effectively met through pay rises alone. These payments target specific segments of personnel to attract and retain staff in hard-to-fill areas. Historically, such payments have accounted for only 5% of typical military compensation, but have significantly impacted recruitment and retention. They supplement military pay in cases such as high civilian pay for similar skills, rapid demand growth, challenging work conditions, expensive training investments, and specialised knowledge requirements (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, 2012, p xvii).

Research indicates that monetary bonuses for critical occupations are effective and cost-efficient incentives for hiring and retaining personnel (Asch et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2018). Asch et al. (2010, p xvii) estimated that without increased bonuses for additional recruits between 2004 and 2008, the U.S. military would have recruited 20% fewer quality personnel. In response to retention concerns, the U.S. Department

of Defense quadrupled spending on re-enlistment bonuses (Golding et al., 2006, p 12). However, although enlistment bonuses are cost-effective tools for achieving recruitment goals in hard-to-fill roles, such personnel often leave to apply their acquired skills in the civilian sector (Warner, 2012, p 72).

Non-monetary benefits are sometimes considered less economically efficient than monetary ones because they limit how employees can spend their earnings. However, the popularity of non-monetary and deferred benefits may partly stem from the fact that many are not taxed. Employers offer non-monetary benefits to ensure or maintain desirable employee characteristics (Murray and the Congressional Budget Office, 2007, p 17). Non-monetary benefits are also successful because employees often perceive them as unexpected bonuses or gifts, not contractual compensation (Akerlof, 1982). Nonetheless, since it is often easier to recognise the value of money than non-monetary and deferred benefits, some analysts believe that direct monetary payments allow employers to retain a larger and more capable workforce at the same total cost (Murray and Congressional Budget Office, 2007, p 27).

2.3.2 Motivation

Theories of Motivation

There is substantial evidence that intrinsic motivation is a crucial factor in both attrition and retention in the military (e.g. Cameron and Pierce, 1994). Intrinsic motivation, often referred to as “psychological compensation,” relates to the psychological rewards individuals gain from their work, in contrast to extrinsic motivation, which involves economic rewards (Thomas and Jansen, 1996, p 1). The concept of intrinsic motivation has been somewhat ambiguous, partly due to the unclear definition of “intrinsic”. Some authors use “intrinsic” to mean that motivation is inherent to the individual, i.e. psychological, while others use it to mean that it is inseparable from the task performed. According to Thomas and Jansen (1991), intrinsic motivation includes psychological rewards which stem directly from the nature of the task. Therefore, research on intrinsic motivation focuses on characteristics inherent to both the individual and the task performed (see Bandura, 1988; Kanfer, 1990).

The potential benefits of intrinsic motivation for tasks and individual decision-making include flexibility, adaptability, responsiveness, new insights, learning, and satisfaction. These benefits are expected to lead to increased retention and better readiness at both the individual and unit levels (Thomas and Jansen, 1996, p i).

Three Theories of Intrinsic Motivation

Cognitive Evaluation Theory: This psychological theory explains the effects of external factors on intrinsic motivation. It emphasises activities arising from the task itself as a source of intrinsic motivation, overlooking the importance of the intended purposes of the task (Deci, 1971; Deci and Ryan, 1987). The theory effectively explains enjoyment in activities by identifying two elements of intrinsic motivation

derived from task-related activities: choice (autonomy) and competence based on experience. Research emphasises how feedback and external rewards shape these feelings (Thomas and Jansen, 1996, p 12).

Job Characteristics Model (JCM): Developed by Hackman and Oldham (1980), this theory of job design identifies the key factors which make work motivating, satisfying, and engaging for employees. This approach to intrinsic motivation emphasises the significance of the task's purpose or intended outcomes as sources of intrinsic rewards. The theory focuses on how five job design aspects (job characteristics) shape these psychological states: task significance, skill variety, task identity, autonomy, and feedback (Thomas and Jansen, 1996, p 13). Research also clearly shows that these job characteristics influence job satisfaction (Loher et al., 1985), which in turn increases retention (Mowday et al., 1982).

Integrative Theory: Combining elements of the Cognitive Evaluation Theory and the Job Characteristics Model, this theory posits four types of intrinsic rewards: a sense of meaning, choice, competence, and progress. These rewards correspond to four types of decision-making behaviour which define autonomy: commitment to a meaningful purpose, choosing activities to achieve this purpose, monitoring quality (competence), and tracking progress towards the purpose (Thomas and Jansen, 1996, p i).

Motivation and the Military

Researchers have extensively studied the motives for joining the military since the 1970s, often using Moskos's (1977) institutional-occupational (I-O) model. Moskos distinguishes between two types of military organisation: institutional and occupational. Institutional military organisations rely on values and norms which promote a sense of personal duty and transcend individual interests. This perspective emphasises intrinsic values such as duty, service, loyalty, discipline, honour, and patriotism (Griffith, 2008; Lawrence and Legree, 1996; Moskos, 1977; Woodruff et al., 2006). On the other hand, the occupational model views the military as a job like any other civilian occupation, where individuals serve for personal interest and external incentives such as monetary rewards, salary, benefits, allowances, educational funding, adventure, travel, professional training, or promotion opportunities (Griffith, 2008; Moskos, 1977; Štampar, 2014, pp 94–95; Woodruff et al., 2006; Mastroianni, 2005, p 76).

Pliske et al. (1986) suggested that individuals enlist in the U.S. military for various economic and psychological reasons, identifying six motivational factors: **self-fulfilment, economic advancement, military service, time, travel, and money for education**. Another study by the National Defence Research Institute indicated that the decision to join the military is **negatively related to individuals' academic abilities, financial resources for education, and employment opportunities** (Antel et al., 1987).

Conversely, Eighmey (2006, p 313, 326) found that young people join the military for material reasons as well as values such as **duty to the country, self-discipline, and leadership skills**. Other studies have shown that intrinsic values such as patriotism and the desire to serve in the military still play a crucial role in the decision to join (Park and Avery, 2016; Woodruff et al., 2006).

Segal and Segal (2004) identified additional factors influencing the decision to join the military among students. Students with fewer **post-secondary education opportunities were more inclined to choose a military career**, while **those who excelled in high school and had university-educated parents were less likely to make this choice**. Gibson (2007) noted that parental attitudes can create social pressure influencing young people's decisions to join the military.

In his study on the motivation of service members who joined between 2001 and 2010, Fransen (2019) highlighted the presence of both institutional and occupational aspects, as personnel were motivated by both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons. He noted that "institutional or intrinsic values are clearly still predominant in the current [American] military" (Fransen, 2019, p 187).

Burland and Lundquist (2013) found that occupational motivators are more common in support roles, while institutional motivators prevail in combat roles. They also noted that motivational differences between occupations diminish with longer service periods.

Hodný and Sarvaš (1999) investigated the attitudes of Czech conscripts towards a military career in the late 1990s, particularly their inclination to become professional service members. They found that conscripts **preferred occupational incentives** over institutional ones, with only a minority favouring the latter. Outdated technology, a militaristic mentality, and the low social status associated with the military profession in the Czech Republic were identified as the main deterrents to pursuing a military career. Additionally, a significant proportion of conscripts expressed racial and national intolerance. In contrast, the authors suggested that the military could mitigate these tensions and develop into an inclusive institution promoting racial and national understanding.

The significance of institutional factors as the main motivation for a military career was highlighted by Davidová et al. (2023, p. 61), contrasting studies that emphasized occupational factors, although they acknowledged their influence. They found that service members who **identify with the organisation's goals, visions, and tasks** show interest in the quality of organisational services, collaboration with other team members to achieve common goals, support for the activities of others, and interest in further self-education.

Davidová et al. (2023) also noted that **social security**, including regular pay and healthcare, is a significant motivator for new employees, particularly older service

members. Conversely, the relative importance of social security decreases with higher levels of education. Similarly, social security is more important for employees with partners compared to those without.

The Role of Risk

The armed forces face unique challenges compared to private and other public institutions, including lower pay, higher risk, and ethical dilemmas arising from the dangerous nature of military service. For this reason, **risk poses a significant barrier to attracting new recruits**. Recently, individuals in Western societies **have become more risk-averse**, prioritising risk in their decision-making processes (Acquarelli et al., 2022). Beck (1992) describes the modern “risk society”, which is more aware and simultaneously concerned about (environmental, social, technological) risks threatening traditional structures and institutions. Additionally, with declining birth rates and an ageing population, society as a whole is less willing to risk the lives of service members due to the **emotional capital** they represent to their families (Luttwak, 1995). **Risk also influences the dynamic and evolving identity of modern service members** (Haitiner and Kümmel, 2009).

With regard to risk, Vuga Beršnak (2014) noted that **Slovenian society has a predominantly negative attitude towards risk**, which she describes as a “safety bubble”. This leads to an **unwillingness to accept casualties**, even when protecting highly valued societal values, such as humanitarian efforts. Historical and political influences, demographic changes (especially an ageing population), economic challenges, and cultural tendencies to avoid dangerous situations contribute to this negative attitude towards risk.

Changes in societal **perceptions of parenthood, children, and childhood** also play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards risk. The phenomenon of child-centricity or protective childhood has become the norm in modern society, bringing new demands on both children and parents. This is reflected in parents’ sacrifices to meet their children’s needs, greater societal expectations of a protective parental role, especially for mothers, the omnipresence of child monitoring, and the general adjustment and subordination of parents’ lives to their children’s needs (Švab, 2001, 2017). These changes influence service members’ professional behaviour and the assessment of the advantages and benefits of a military career.

2.3.3 Health

Physical Aspects of Health

Previous studies have shown that attrition is linked to various pre-employment factors such as demographics and physical health issues (e.g. obesity or prior injuries). For this reason, the military also evaluates these aspects in potential recruits (Knapik et al., 2004).

The military places great importance on the relationship between body composition and the ability to perform physical tasks (see Personnel-General, 2019). This not only influences decisions concerning the acceptance or rejection of candidates, but is also crucial for an individual's success and advancement within the service. It also has financial implications, due to the high costs of training new personnel to fill vacancies caused by existing members failing to meet physical standards, leading to attrition which negatively impacts unit readiness and effectiveness (Marriott and Grumstrup-Scott, 1992, p vii). In the U.S. there has been growing concern about the potential inadequacy of current (outdated) health/physical standards for recruitment and retention due to demographic changes reflecting increasing diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and age (Marriott and Grumstrup-Scott, 1992, p ix; see also Naghii, 2006).

Maintaining combat readiness requires service members to sustain good health and peak physical fitness. The rising prevalence of obesity and related diseases increases healthcare expenses and, along with indirect costs such as lost productivity, affects the cost-effectiveness and overall readiness of the military (McLaughlin and Wittert, 2009, p 695). On the other hand, stringent fitness criteria may not be necessary for all military roles, suggesting a reconsideration of standards and different requirements based on job types.

Maintaining good physical fitness in the military requires an active and athletic lifestyle. During the transition to military service or the initial voluntary service period, personnel are particularly exposed to sudden increased physical demands, often leading to injuries. A study by Vuga Beršnak et al. (2022) on military-specific risk factors for the well-being and health of military families found that in a Slovenian military sample, the most common injuries occurred during training and sports activities. Compared to civilians, service members are significantly more likely to suffer from knee injuries, hearing problems, and various joint and ligament injuries. Spinal problems occur equally frequently in both civilian and military samples, differing only in the nature of work causing the injuries. The study also found that health issues in the military sample mainly result from years of excessive strain and sports activities.

Despite prescribed body fat standards for military personnel, numerous studies have shown a trend of increasing overweight among the military population, mirroring the pattern in the general population (Lindquist and Bray, 2001; Mazokopakis, 2004; Poston et al., 2005). This trend also applies to other health issues. With an increasing prevalence of cardiovascular risk factors among younger civilians, similar trends are being observed in the military. A 2008 review of military health data highlighted the prevalence of cardiovascular risk factors, indicating a noticeable increase in cardiovascular vulnerability within this population (McGraw et al., 2008).

Hunter et al. (2015) also found that military fitness requirements, combined with an athletic lifestyle, are associated with a higher risk of atrial fibrillation, similar to that

of athletes. However, as noted by Keithler et al. (2023, p e24), military personnel diagnosed with atrial fibrillation are generally young and have few associated risk factors. More than two-thirds of personnel with atrial fibrillation met the retention standards. There were no differences in deployments or retention between healthy and treated personnel.

Psychological Aspects of Health

Cunha et al. (2015) studied the relationship between psychological characteristics and the likelihood of early discharge in 17,226 newly enlisted US Army personnel. The findings suggested that those with poorer psychological health are more likely to leave early. Moreover, identifying psychologically unsuitable candidates before enlistment can reduce attrition rates and mitigate related administrative and personnel costs.

In 2009, the U.S. Army began using the Global Assessment Tool (GAT) for new recruits. GAT is an online self-assessment questionnaire covering 14 attributes of psychological health and resilience relevant to military life (Cunha et al., 2015, p 1506). The program now called “Azimuth Check” is an updated version of GAT. The survey, averaging twelve minutes, assesses the overall readiness of a service member across five dimensions of personal readiness: physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and family. Based on the responses, personnel receive individual feedback for each dimension, including a graph comparing their scores with others in similar roles and military branches (Army Resilience Directorate, n.d.).

The link between mental health and attrition was also highlighted by Vasterling et al. (2015), who emphasised that rare studies on the mental health of active military personnel have found that worsening health symptoms after deployment to a combat zone increased the likelihood of discharge. Hoge et al. (2006), for instance, found that within a year of returning from deployment, attrition rates among veterans increased by 8% (from 13% to 21%) among Afghanistan war veterans and by 5% (from 16% to 21%) among Iraq war veterans. These findings underscore the potential negative career consequences associated with mental health issues among returning service members (see also Du Preez et al., Han et al., 2014; Pietrzak et al., 2010).

Research (Vuga Beršnak et al., 2022) has shown that mental health problems (PTSD, depression) among SAF service members are not severe, but they are affected by financial problems, family and parental stress, and general health problems. Psychoactive substances are also not commonly abused, but their potential abuse is influenced by family stress, financial problems, work-family conflicts and gender, with men being more prone to abuse substances such as alcohol, medication, drugs, etc. (Vuga Beršnak et al., 2022).

In this article, we have undertaken a two-stage analysis of the literature on the topic of retention. In the first step, we scanned the literature from established authors from

Conclusion Slovenia and the international environment, identified the factors that influence employee retention in the military organisation, and coded it according to different themes. In the second step, we developed a model and categorised the factors at different socioecological levels, namely the individual, micro and macro levels.

We have shown the importance of retaining quality and key personnel for the organisation, as the departure of such employees can result in the loss of investment in their development and training. Moreover, they take with them tacit knowledge, which can weaken the organisation's long-term security and threaten its competitive advantage (Orehek, 2023). In addition, we have emphasised the importance of various factors at different levels; for example, the importance of cultural characteristics in the implementation of retention measures, as a measure that is successful in one environment may be completely ineffective in another. One such example is flexible working hours, which can have a positive effect in one society and the exact opposite in another. Besides culture, the demographic profile of society and the organisation is also important. Job changes are more frequent in younger generations, who are more likely to seek new opportunities and challenges, while older employees tend to remain in their organisations and can therefore be a pillar of the organisation. The economic situation and the labour market play an important role, as does the education not only of the potential employee, but also of their parents.

In addition to macro-level factors, our literature review also examined micro-level factors, highlighting the importance of relationships in the work environment, relationships between commanders and subordinates, values and organisational culture, and family support, as well as social networks which tie individuals to the organisation. We also considered the significance of the personal loss associated with changing jobs. At the individual level, we addressed various factors, including mental and physical health, sources of motivation, financial satisfaction and other characteristics.

As it is crucial to monitor turnover within the organisation and identify the reasons for leaving, and to do this at different levels and repeatedly, our project research team will proceed with implementing a mixed methods research design to test the factors in the Slovenian Armed Forces and learn **which of the identified factors are present in the Slovenian environment, what impact they have, and how they correlate with and influence the intention to stay** in the SAF. By monitoring turnover and understanding the specific risk and protective factors affecting retention within the SAF, we aim to develop effective strategies and systemic solutions tailored to our unique context. The proposed theoretical model serves as a foundation for these efforts and guides our approach to enhancing personnel retention in the SAF.

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