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KREPITEV VOJAŠKEGA KAPLANSTVA V SLOVENIJI: PRIMERJALNA ANALIZA IN PRIPOROČILA ŠTIRIH ČLANIC NATA

ENHANCING MILITARY CHAPLAINCY IN SLOVENIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FOUR NATO ALLIES

Povzetek Duhovna oskrba je pomemben del pripravljenosti enot in dobrega počutja pripadnikov, predvsem v vojaškem okolju, v katerem je osebna svoboda omejena. V članku je predstavljena primerjava slovenskega pravnega in institucionalnega okvira vojaške kaplanske službe s sistemi štirih držav – Združenih držav Amerike, Hrvaške, Nemčije in Združenega kraljestva. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je Slovenija vzpostavila sodoben in sekularen sistem, ki ne temelji na konkordatih, temveč na zakonodaji. Kljub temu praksa še vedno razkriva nekatere vrzeli, zlasti pri vključevanju različnih ver, financiranju ter sistematičnem vrednotenju.

Ključne besede *Vojaška duhovna služba, duhovna oskrba, Slovenska vojska, Nato, primerjalno pravo, verska svoboda.*

Abstract Spiritual care is an essential component of force readiness and service member well-being, especially in military environments, where personal liberty is constrained. This article focuses on the Slovenian legal and institutional arrangements for military chaplaincy compared to those of four countries – the United States, Croatia, Germany and the United Kingdom. The comparison shows that Slovenia has developed a clear and secular legal foundation for chaplaincy which avoids Concordat-based dependencies. However, practical implementation still reveals gaps, particularly in multi-faith representation, inclusive funding, and performance evaluation.

Key words *Military chaplaincy, spiritual support, Slovenian Armed Forces, NATO, comparative law, religious freedom.*

Introduction Freedom of conscience and religion is not only a liberal claim, but also legitimises the state's monopoly on the use of force in democratic constitutions. The duty to protect this freedom is particularly acute in areas where personal autonomy is restricted, for example in the armed forces, law enforcement agencies and prisons, all of which are specially protected by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1953)¹ and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations 1966)². Within the military, organised spiritual support is both a legal obligation and an operational advantage which strengthens morale, ethical decision-making, psychological resilience, and unit cohesion (Dörfler-Dierken, 2011; Gutkowski, Wilkes, 2011).

More than thirty years after independence, military chaplaincy in Slovenia is still governed by a patchwork of laws and regulations – the Religious Freedom Act (2007)³, the Defence Act (1994)⁴, the Act on Service in the Slovenian Armed Forces (2007)⁵, and a government decree from 2003⁶. This fragmentation weakens normative clarity and institutional accountability (Čepar, 2014; Zobavnik et al., 2014). Scholars point to the resulting challenges: the predominance of the Catholic military vicariate, limited access for minorities and non-religious groups, and a lack of systematic oversight (Pengov, 2011; Zobavnik et al., 2014). Additionally, the issue of dual nationality, whereby individuals with dual citizenship cannot serve in the Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF), creates another structural challenge for broadening chaplaincy representation (Kogovšek Šalamon, 2016). Ethnographic research confirms that the current concept reflects historical privileges rather than the current religious diversity in the SAF (Andrejc, Wilkes, 2016).

Although there have been many national studies, which are historical (Porter, 2005; Bachrach, 2003), ethical (Todd, 2009) and organisational (Howson, 2011), systematic, cross-national analyses of legal structures, funding and oversight remain rare and are virtually non-existent for Slovenia. The domestic literature covers individual dimensions such as church-state law (Pengov, 2011), funding (Zobavnik et al., 2014; Čepar, 2014), constitutional doctrine (U-I-92/07), and pluralism within the SAF (Andrejc, Wilkes, 2016), but no study has integrated these strands into a NATO-centred comparison, or incorporated NATO and Allied perspectives on military chaplaincy.

This article fills this gap by comparing Slovenia to four Allied models – the United States (US), Croatia, Germany, and the United Kingdom (UK) – in terms of three structural dimensions: legal clarity, financial transparency and inclusiveness. These

¹ *European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950) – in force from 1953.*

² *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966, Art. 18.*

³ *Religious Freedom Act, 2007 – Zakon o verski svobodi. Uradni list RS, 14/07.*

⁴ *Defence Act, 1994 – Zakon o obrambi. Uradni list RS, 82/94.*

⁵ *Act on Service in the Slovenian Armed Forces, 2007.*

⁶ *Decree on the Organization of Religious Spiritual Care 2003 – Pravilnik o organizaciji religiozne duhovne oskrbe. Uradni list RS, št. 58/03.*

comparator countries were selected to offer a diverse framework for analysis, as they vary in size, religious demographics and historical chaplaincy models, providing a broad NATO-contextual perspective. Based on doctrinal analysis and comparative law methodology, it proposes time-bound reforms which would strengthen religious rights and operational cohesion while aligning the SAF with evolving NATO and EU expectations.

The central research question is whether Slovenia's existing legal and institutional framework for military chaplaincy meets the principles of secularism, pluralism, and operational effectiveness when compared to those of its Allies. The structure is organised as follows: Section 2 traces the normative development of military spiritual care; Section 3 assesses Slovenia's current framework; Section 4 presents the four-country comparison, while also including insights particularly relevant to the Slovenian context; and Section 5 provides the discussion and conclusion. Throughout the text, primary legal sources (constitutions, laws, bilateral agreements, military regulations and court decisions) are triangulated with secondary literature and government reports to ensure both analytical accuracy and practical relevance.

1 THE NORMATIVE EVOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND SPIRITUAL CARE

1.1 Historical foundations

The protection of conscience and religion has deep intellectual roots. In Politics, Aristotle characterised human beings as a *zoon politikon*, whose dignity derives from participation in a just legal order (Aristotle, 1958). Cicero, who drew on Stoic philosophy, located this order in an objective *lex naturae* which binds rulers and ruled alike (Cicero, 2014). In mediaeval Europe, such ideas were translated into constitutional restrictions: The Magna Carta (1215)⁷ limited monarchical absolutism by guaranteeing due process and property rights.

During the Enlightenment, social contract theorists reformulated sovereignty as dependent on the consent of the people. Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* made the separation of powers a cornerstone of limited government (Montesquieu, 1949); Locke and Rousseau combined legitimate authority with the protection of natural rights. These concepts formed the basis for the Habeas Corpus Act (1679)⁸, the English Bill of Rights (1689)⁹, the Declaration of Virginia (1776)¹⁰, the American Declaration of Independence (1776)¹¹, and the French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme* (1789)¹², all of which explicitly protect liberty of thought, conscience and religion.

⁷ *Magna Carta* (England, 1215)

⁸ *Habeas Corpus Act* (England, 1679)

⁹ *Bill of Rights* (England, 1689)

¹⁰ *Virginia Declaration of Rights* (USA, 1776)

¹¹ *Declaration of Independence* (USA, 1776)

¹² *Déclaration des droits de l'homme* (France, 1789)

1.2 The codification of the twentieth century and international humanitarian law

The devastating consequences of the two world wars made it clear that binding international guarantees were necessary. The Charter of the United Nations (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)¹³ formulated religious freedom as a universal right, which was later given treaty status in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966, Article 18). In Europe, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (1950) and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights provide enforceable protection. International humanitarian law supplements these human rights instruments. The Third Geneva Convention (1949, Article 24) categorises chaplains as non-combatants and requires that prisoners of war have access to religious rites, thereby enshrining spiritual care in the minimum guarantees for armed conflicts.

1.3 Contemporary requirements and the Slovenian context

Taken together, these international initiatives underscore the obligation of modern armed forces to facilitate the practice of religion even within the constraints of military discipline. NATO promotes chaplaincy interoperability and pluralistic support through initiatives such as the NATO & Partner Chaplain Operations Course and multinational exercises like BALTOPS, while EU institutions have also encouraged Member States to uphold freedom of religion in institutional settings (NATO School Oberammergau 2023; C6F Navy 2023; European Parliament 2022).

Slovenia shares this historical trajectory. Šimac (2014) traces the path of pastoral care in Slovenian territory from the ad hoc chaplains on the battlefield in Habsburg times to the Apostolic Military Vicariate of 1773, and shows that effective religious support has long depended on coherent legal structures. Although Articles 15, 16 and 41 of the Slovenian Constitution contain modern human rights standards, the current framework for spiritual care in the Slovenian Armed Forces is still scattered across several statutes and subsidiary laws. The effects of this fragmentation, which will be discussed in the next section, focuses on Slovenia's ability to fulfil both its constitutional obligations and NATO's expectations.

2 LEGAL FRAMEWORKS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND SPIRITUAL CARE IN SLOVENIA

Slovenia organises spiritual support for uniformed personnel through a four-layer legal system: constitutional guarantees, framework statutes, implementing regulations, and bilateral agreements. This section explains each layer, highlights the main gaps and shows how the layers interact in everyday military practice. Table 1 lists the key instruments at each tier, the protection they provide and the gaps which remain. The discussion that follows explains how these layers interact in practice. This approach

¹³ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948)*

reflects a major historical transformation: from a post-socialist regime which once repressed religious expression, to a democratic constitutional order which affirms freedom of belief and obliges institutions to accommodate spiritual needs. Following independence in 1991, the Slovenian state adopted a neutral and pluralistic stance which obliges the armed forces and other closed institutions to enable regular and equal religious care for all personnel, regardless of affiliation (Ivanc, 2015; Ivanc, 2018).

2.1 Constitutional foundations

The Constitution sets a high bar for protecting belief. Article 15 states that rights are exercised directly under the Constitution and can be restricted only as expressly provided. Article 16 lists freedom of religion among rights that remain non-derogable in war or emergency, placing it beside the right to life and the prohibition of torture. Article 41 guarantees everyone the right to profess religion in private and public life, and forbids forced disclosure of belief. These provisions adopt the same standard found in Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and require lower-level legislation to enable effective and equal religious support.

Their practical meaning was clarified in Constitutional Court Decision U-I-92/07 (15 April 2010). The Court held that: freedom of religion protects theistic, atheistic and non-theistic convictions alike; the State must remain religiously neutral, yet neutrality does not bar cooperation with faith communities; any financial support must respect equal treatment of all communities; the right to spiritual care in the military does not violate the negative freedom of non-believers because participation is voluntary; and differentiating between the Army and Police is justified by their distinct operational environments (Constitutional Court U-I-92/07, 2010). U-I-92/07 thus confirms the principle that spiritual care arrangements must combine neutrality, autonomy and equality.

2.2 Statutory layer

Parliament has translated the constitutional promise into three framework statutes. The Religious Freedom Act (ZVS, 2007) requires state bodies which restrict movement to provide both personal and collective worship opportunities for every registered community. Because the statute speaks in general terms, the practical matters of chaplain accreditation, financing and dispute resolution must be worked out elsewhere. Articles 22–25 extend the constitutional guarantee to military barracks, police units, prisons and hospitals. The Act, however, sets only broad principles; it delegates procedure, staffing and funding to sector-specific laws and regulations (Čepar, 2014). The Defence Act (Zobr, 1994) guarantees every soldier the right to spiritual support (Article 52), and assigns this duty to the Minister of Defence. It enables the establishment of a Military Vicariate, a structure led by military clergy and tasked with organising worship and pastoral support. While the Vicariate is embedded in the military hierarchy, its chaplains remain accountable to

their faith communities in spiritual matters (Ivanc, 2018). The Act on Service in the SAF (ZSSloV, 2007) integrates chaplaincy into a wider welfare system. Chapter VII mandates commanders to “enable access to religious services” (Articles 76 and 83) and integrates chaplaincy into the broader concept of holistic care alongside health, psychological and legal support. It extends support to some family members and ensures chaplaincy presence in deployments (Ivanc, 2018; Čepar, 2014), yet the Act leaves unresolved questions around pluralism, training, and oversight.

2.3 Implementing regulation

The Decree on Religious Spiritual Care (2003) operationalises Article 52 of the Defence Act. It formalises the Military Vicariate as part of the General Staff and defines staff roles (Military Vicar, Assistants, Chaplains). It obliges commanders to ensure worship facilities and privacy, even during missions abroad (Ivanc, 2018). The decree permits family support, spiritual first aid after trauma, and engagement with civilian religious authorities. However, it lacks diversity metrics, reporting obligations, or mechanisms for external review (Zobavnik et al., 2010).

2.4 Bilateral agreements

Two official agreements, one with the Catholic Bishops’ Conference (1999) and one with the Evangelical Church (2003), define cooperation with the state in military chaplaincy. They regulate sacraments, salaries, and access to facilities (Ivanc, 2018). However, no equivalent agreements exist with the Islamic Community, Orthodox Church or others, despite a 2007 framework agreement with the Islamic Community guaranteeing spiritual access in public institutions. This legal asymmetry undermines parity and contradicts constitutional principles (Ivanc, 2018; Constitutional Court, 2010).

2.5 Remaining gaps

Despite the robust legal framework, delivery is weakened by fragmentation, lack of multifaith inclusivity, and inadequate external accountability. As Ivanc (2018) explains, implementation depends heavily on command discretion, and smaller communities struggle to secure equal access or recognition. These issues result in a system that is largely mono-confessional, even though Slovenian law protects freedom of conscience for all. Smaller communities must negotiate ad hoc, and lack procedural avenues to negotiate access or employment, often citing bureaucratic obstacles and resource disparities (Čepar, 2014; Blažič, Zobavnik, 2009). One notable structural barrier is that dual nationals (people with more than one citizenship) are currently barred from serving as SAF personnel, including as military chaplains (Kogovšek Šalamon, 2016). The next section compares Slovenia’s arrangement with Croatia, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States to explore options for reform.

3 STRUCTURAL DIMENSIONS OF MILITARY CHAPLAINCY FRAMEWORKS IN THE US, CROATIA, GERMANY, THE UK, AND SLOVENIA

3.1 Legal framework clarity

A clear legal framework is fundamental to any military chaplaincy, defining the authority, status, and limits of chaplains' work within the armed forces. Each of the five countries examined i.e. the US, Croatia, Germany, the UK, and Slovenia provides for military chaplaincy through distinct legal or policy instruments.

In the United States, the chaplaincy is grounded in constitutional principles and federal law. The US Constitution's First Amendment poses a dual mandate of religious free exercise and non-establishment, under which the military chaplaincy has been justified to ensure service members can practise their faith even while in uniform (*Katcoff v Marsh*, 1985). Notably, Congress explicitly authorised military chaplains in Title 10 of the U.S. Code, and the programme's constitutionality was upheld in *Katcoff v. Marsh* (1985) on the basis that providing chaplains is a valid accommodation of soldiers' religious needs rather than a violation of church-state separation. U.S. Department of Defence regulations further delineate chaplains' roles as non-combatant officers who may not exercise command, thereby clarifying their unique status in the military hierarchy. This robust legal framework gives the US chaplaincy a high degree of formal clarity and legitimacy.

In Croatia, the legal foundation for military chaplaincy stems from church-state agreements, particularly a 1996 concordat with the Holy See which established Catholic pastoral care in the armed forces and police (Republic of Croatia and Holy See, 1997). Ratified by Parliament in early 1997, the agreement created a Catholic Military Ordinariate, and formalised the chaplaincy's structure and church-state cooperation. Due to Croatia's constitutional guarantee of religious equality, the government has also extended similar rights or agreements to other major faith communities (Vidov, 2017). While Catholic chaplaincy remains predominant, other recognised religions can minister to their members in uniform. This concordat-based model offers legal clarity, as obligations are explicitly laid out in treaty form and domestic law. However, it has sparked political debate, given its strong emphasis on one denomination and the significant financial and legal commitments it imposes on the state (Benačić, Miloš, 2014).

Germany follows a hybrid model where military chaplaincy is grounded in both constitutional law and formal agreements with religious institutions. Article 141 of the Weimar Constitution, incorporated via Article 140 of the Basic Law, guarantees religious organisations the right to offer spiritual care in public institutions, including the military, if there is demand and no coercion (Pulte, 2018). This permissive legal framework anticipates chaplaincy in the Bundeswehr. To implement this, the federal government established agreements with major churches. In 1957, it signed the Military Chaplaincy Agreement (*Militärseelsorgevertrag*) with the Evangelical

Church in Germany (EKD), setting the structure for Protestant chaplaincy (Evangelical Church in Germany and Federal Republic of Germany, 1957). A similar arrangement exists with the Roman Catholic Church, which runs a Military Ordinariate for Catholic personnel (Pulte, 2018). Chaplains in Germany are not commissioned officers but serve as part of the military's civilian component. The Military Chaplaincy is an independent unit under the Ministry of Defence, outside the chain of command (Bundeswehr, 2025). Chaplains are accredited by the state and authorised by their religious bodies, maintaining a clear division of roles. German law mandates negotiations with the Apostolic See and EKD to ensure spiritual care (Pulte, 2018). Recent legislation extended this model to include other faiths, such as Judaism, with a 2019–2020 law enabling the appointment of military rabbis (DW, 2020).

The United Kingdom does not have a single codified document defining military chaplaincy, but its framework is based on longstanding custom and various regulations which provide clarity. The British military chaplaincy, with centuries of tradition, operates under the Crown's authority. Chaplains are commissioned into their respective service branches (e.g. the Royal Army Chaplains' Department), but unlike other officers, they do not hold command rank. Naval chaplains, for instance, are "commissioned as such" but not as warfare officers (The Armed Forces (Naval Chaplains) Regulations 2009, reg. 5). The legal foundation lies in the Armed Forces Acts and Queen's Regulations, which recognise chaplains as officers who serve as religious ministers. Their ecclesiastical authority comes from their sending church; for example, Anglican chaplains must hold a licence from their bishop, even while employed by the Ministry of Defence (Tavala, n.d.). MoD regulations enable this dual authority by accommodating both military and church law. Although not enshrined in a single statute, detailed policy and a clear organisational structure (with each service led by a Chaplain-General or equivalent) ensure coherence. The UK model treats chaplains as essential to personnel support, and their role is protected by military law. Providing spiritual care is considered part of the Armed Forces' duty of care, reinforcing the chaplaincy's legitimacy despite the absence of a written constitution (Ibid.).

Slovenia's military chaplaincy framework, though newer, compares well in terms of legal clarity. Unlike Croatia, which relies on international concordats, Slovenia has embedded chaplaincy in domestic law and defence policy, aligning more with the cooperative model seen in Germany. Notably, Slovenia's approach has been pluralistic from the outset, allowing all registered religious communities to participate, unlike Germany and Croatia, which initially prioritised historic church ties. However, while Slovenia provides a strong statutory foundation, effective chaplaincy also depends on implementation, inclusivity, and oversight, not just legal structure.

This alignment with NATO principles can also be found in soft law instruments and Alliance practice. For example, NATO's M4-37 Chaplain Operations Course promotes spiritual mentoring as a tool for operational cohesion, and emphasises interfaith cooperation in multinational missions (NATO School Oberammergau, 2023).

3.2 Financial transparency and accountability

Financial transparency and accountability are crucial for the legitimacy of military chaplaincy programmes. Since chaplaincy often involves public funding (e.g. chaplains' salaries, facilities for worship), stakeholders demand that these expenditures be transparent and subject to proper oversight. Across the four countries, there are different models of funding the chaplaincy, each with implications for accountability. In the US, military chaplains are funded directly by the federal government through the defined personnel budget. As commissioned officers, their salaries and benefits are included in standard military appropriations, subject to Congressional review and routine audits (U.S. Department of Defence, 2021). This model ensures high transparency and accountability, with chaplaincy expenditures publicly documented and monitored through internal audits and oversight mechanisms. While the chaplaincy represents a small share of the defence budget, its justification lies in protecting service members' religious rights.

In contrast, Croatia's chaplaincy funding is rooted in its 1996 concordat with the Holy See, which obliges the state to finance the Catholic Military Ordinariate and chaplains' activities (Republic of Croatia and Holy See, 1997). These expenses are covered through the Ministry of Defence, but questions about transparency persist. Church-related state transfers, including those for chaplaincy, amount to hundreds of millions of kuna annually (Benačić, Miloš, 2014). Although chaplains' salaries and activities are processed through official MoD systems and budgets, oversight is more complex due to the concordat structure and lump-sum funding to the Church, which can limit direct state control.

Germany's military chaplaincy is publicly funded, with chaplains salaried by the Ministry of Defence as civilian staff, ensuring transparency through audits and parliamentary oversight (Bundeswehr, 2025; Pulte, 2018). While the state covers personnel costs, churches oversee daily operations such as chaplain selection and religious materials under formal agreements. Joint committees and regular reports from the EKD and Catholic Ordinariate support coordination, while major expenses require MoD approval. The 2020 establishment of the Jewish chaplaincy included specific oversight mechanisms, a model expected for upcoming Muslim chaplaincy roles (DW, 2020). This reflects Germany's "dual accountability" system: state financial control paired with ecclesiastical responsibility.

In the UK, the chaplaincy is funded through the defence budget. Chaplains are commissioned personnel (without command authority) and are subject to standard MoD financial regulations. Funding covers salaries, training, and operational costs such as chapel maintenance and religious materials. Oversight is largely internal, managed by commanding officers and chaplaincy directors and supported by audits. The 2024 introduction of Non-Religious Pastoral Officers (NRPOs), funded on the same terms as chaplains, demonstrates a shift towards inclusive welfare services (Ministry of Defence, 2023). Chaplaincy budgets are ultimately embedded in the

UK's broader defence accountability framework, audited by the National Audit Office and reviewed by Parliament (United Kingdom Parliament, 2021).

In Slovenia, the funding of military and broader public chaplaincy remains legally permitted but underdeveloped in practice. While the Constitutional Court confirmed in 2010 that clergy employment in public institutions does not violate constitutional secularism, the financial mechanisms remain opaque (Constitutional Court RS, 2010). The Religious Freedom Act permits state support for religious communities if they serve the public good (ZVS, 2007, Article 27), but lacks clear criteria for equitable distribution. In practice, the Roman Catholic Church receives most funding, including for military chaplaincy, while other faiths report limited access to resources (Čepar, 2014; Blažič, Zobavnik, 2009). Although legal provisions guarantee spiritual care in institutions like the military, prisons, and hospitals (ZVS, 2007, Articles 22–25), few minority communities have expressed formal interest in agreements with the Ministry of Defence, often due to small numbers (United States Department of State, 2023). Experts argue that Slovenia should adopt transparent, pluralist funding criteria and possibly neutral expert committees, following models in Germany, Norway, or Sweden, which base funding on membership or legal parity (Porenta, 2022). Overall, Slovenia's system remains modest and selective, with relatively low per capita investment in religious communities compared to EU peers (Pengov, 2011), and would benefit from clearer, more inclusive rules for future chaplaincy development.

3.3 Religious and philosophical inclusivity

The US military chaplaincy is explicitly designed to be multi-faith and pluralistic. While it originally consisted mostly of Christian clergy (primarily Protestant and Catholic), the Chaplain Corps has gradually expanded to include representatives of many of the faiths present in American society (Katcoff v. Marsh, 1985). By the 2010s, the Department of Defence had authorised over 100 different religious organisations to endorse chaplains, ranging from mainline and evangelical Protestant churches to Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and other communities (DoD, 2020). This diversity means that most service members can access spiritual care from a chaplain of their own faith or at least one familiar with their beliefs. Importantly, chaplains are trained not only to perform religious services for their own faith group, but also to facilitate or coordinate care for those of other traditions (Ibid.). For instance, a Protestant chaplain may provide support to a Jewish service member and help arrange contact with a rabbi when possible. This approach is embedded in Department of Defence regulations, which require chaplains to “perform or provide” services in a way that respects religious pluralism (Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Defence, 2004). The US military has had Jewish chaplains since the 19th century, appointed Muslim chaplains from the 1990s, and more recently has added Buddhist and Hindu chaplains.

In Croatia, the military chaplaincy remains primarily Catholic, reflecting both the country's religious demographics and the 1996 concordat with the Holy See which

established the Catholic Military Ordinariate (Republic of Croatia and Holy See, 1997). While this meets the needs of the majority, it limits access for non-Catholic personnel. To align with the constitutional principles of religious equality, Croatia has made limited provisions for other faiths, such as allowing Orthodox and Muslim clergy to serve on a part-time or consultative basis (Tavala, n.d.). These arrangements often take the form of signed protocols rather than full institutional chaplaincy corps. For example, by the late 2010s, reports confirmed the presence of at least one Orthodox priest and an imam available for consultations within the armed forces (Tavala, n.d.). However, these services are not yet equal in scope or permanence to the Catholic chaplaincy. Deployment in NATO missions has encouraged cooperation with Allied chaplains, fostering some practical pluralism. Nonetheless, compared to more pluralistic systems such as those in the US or the UK, Croatia's model remains largely Catholic-centric. While budget provisions exist to support other faiths, the implementation of inclusive chaplaincy is slow and constrained by existing treaties and institutional tradition.

Germany's military chaplaincy was historically limited to Protestant and Catholic clergy, reflecting its dual-confessional heritage. For decades, chaplains from the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Catholic Military Ordinariate exclusively served Bundeswehr personnel. However, this model excluded minority faiths, such as Jews and Muslims, despite their growing presence in the armed forces – including an estimated 3,000 Muslim soldiers (DW, 2020). In 2019–2020, Germany took a major step towards inclusivity by introducing Jewish chaplains into the Bundeswehr for the first time since the 1930s. The move was described as a symbol of solidarity and equality, with rabbis entering service in 2021 under a formal agreement with the Central Council of Jews in Germany (DW, 2020). Plans are also underway to incorporate Muslim imams and Orthodox Christian priests, developed in consultation with religious communities. The system remains based on cooperation agreements between the state and faith communities, but now includes a wider range of partners. All chaplains are expected to serve all soldiers when needed, while also offering specific support to members of their own religion (OSCE, 2023). This inclusive shift is seen as essential to reflecting Germany's pluralistic society and ensuring equal spiritual care in the military.

The United Kingdom's military chaplaincy has long included multiple Christian denominations and, since the early 2000s, also non-Christian chaplains. The British Armed Forces have Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and Buddhist chaplains serving alongside their Anglican and Catholic counterparts (UK Ministry of Defence, 2023). Chaplains collaborate across services under the oversight of the Chaplain-General, and provide or facilitate support for all personnel, regardless of belief. In 2024, the UK further expanded its inclusivity by introducing Non-Religious Pastoral Officers (NRPOs). These humanist staff members offer confidential support to service members who do not identify with any faith (UK Ministry of Defence, 2023). This decision reflects changing social attitudes, as many younger recruits identify as non-religious. NRPOs work within chaplaincy teams, ensuring that all personnel, religious or secular,

receive emotional and moral care. This innovation positions the UK at the forefront of philosophical inclusivity in military pastoral care, broadening the traditional understanding of chaplaincy to support well-being across all worldviews.

Although Slovenian legislation guarantees the right to spiritual care in public institutions, its practical implementation reveals notable disparities. The current framework favours larger religious communities, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. The Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF) Chaplaincy primarily serves Catholic and Evangelical members through formal agreements, even though the law requires equal access for all faiths (Act on Service, 2007). Minority religious groups, such as Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Buddhists, frequently face barriers to equal participation due to limited funding, a lack of trained personnel, and legal requirements such as Slovenian citizenship and formal theological education (Čepar, 2014; Blažič, Zobavnik, 2009). In practice, the Slovenian citizenship requirement means that individuals with dual nationality are excluded from military service, further limiting the pool of potential chaplains. These challenges are compounded by outdated demographic data. The last official census to record religious affiliation was in 2002, showing 2.4% Muslims and 2.3% Orthodox Christians. Since 2011, Slovenia has employed a register-based census system which excludes questions on religion, making it difficult to plan services equitably (RTVSLO, 2021). Although the Religious Freedom Act is religion-neutral and allows for any registered community to participate in military chaplaincy, practical constraints such as clergy shortages have slowed progress (ZVS, 2007).

The SAF chaplaincy was established in 2000, initially appointing Catholic priests to serve many service members, followed shortly afterwards by a Lutheran chaplain reflecting Slovenia's Protestant minority (United States Department of State, 2023). However, no full-time Serbian Orthodox or Muslim chaplains have been appointed to date. The Serbian Orthodox Church reported in 2020 that it was preparing two priests to potentially join the SAF by 2023 (United States Department of State, 2021). Similarly, although Slovenia's Muslim community, estimated at around 100,000 individuals, has expressed interest in military representation, the Ministry of Defence has yet to appoint an imam (ecoi.net, n.d.). In the interim, Muslim soldiers can access spiritual support from local imams, and religious accommodations (e.g. halal meals, time for prayer) are arranged as required (Ibid.).

Spiritual care in prisons and hospitals follows a similar pattern, often depending on the resources of religious communities, which limits service provision by smaller or less established groups (Čepar, 2014). Funding distribution is another concern. While the law allows for financial support to religious workers (ZVS, 2007, Article 27), many funds such as those for maintaining religious buildings go to Catholic institutions, with smaller communities receiving disproportionately less (Zobavnik et al., 2014).

Despite these inequalities, there are signs of growing awareness and policy discussion. Slovenia's secular framework requires neutrality and equal access, and both civil

society actors and international institutions, such as the European Parliament (2022), have called for transparent, inclusive spiritual care frameworks. The SAF currently addresses gaps through cross-support: existing chaplains offer general assistance to all personnel, and the military arranges for external clergy where needed (United States Department of State, 2021). Plans to introduce an Orthodox chaplain and potentially a part-time or reserve imam reflect slow but meaningful steps towards greater inclusivity.

Conclusion The Slovenian military chaplaincy is a convincing example of a modern, law-based concept for religious support within the armed forces. Compared to older NATO models, the Slovenian system reflects the strengths and growing pains of a smaller, pluralistic and secular state which is striving to strike a balance between legal clarity, financial transparency and comprehensive spiritual care.

From a legal perspective, the Slovenian framework is solid. It was created in the early 2000s and avoids the historical entanglements of contracts between state and church seen in countries such as Croatia, where the privileged role of the Catholic Church is enshrined in concordats. Instead, Slovenia has framed its pastoral care as a public service governed by national laws, mirroring elements of the US and German models where religious bodies are partners rather than owners of the pastoral care system. This structure offers Slovenia flexibility and alignment with secular governance principles and ensures that all registered religious communities are eligible to participate. In contrast to Germany and Croatia, which initially restricted their chaplaincies to historical churches and only gradually opened them up to other faiths, the Slovenian framework was inclusive from the outset, at least legally speaking. Its legal basis provides more legal clarity than the British customary system, which has developed through tradition and policy rather than legislation. However, implementation in Slovenia still reveals gaps between formal inclusivity and practical access.

Slovenia's approach to funding pastoral care is characterised by accountability and restraint. In contrast to the Croatian concordat-based system, which has been criticised for non-transparent transfers to religious institutions, in Slovenia all pastoral care expenditure is accounted for in the state budget. The chaplains are permanent state employees, and no funds are transferred to religious organisations without oversight. This system is in line with best practice in Germany and the US, where financial transparency is a priority.

Nevertheless, financial inclusivity remains a challenge. Despite the legal possibility of employing chaplains of all recognised religions, that is still not the case. Orthodox and Muslim representatives have called for the inclusion of clergy and some progress has been made, such as training efforts for Orthodox priests and expressed interest in appointing a military imam, but these are not yet being realised in practice. So, while Slovenia avoids the pitfalls of treaty favouritism, its financial commitment to pluralism is still evolving.

Inclusivity is where Slovenia faces its greatest test. Historically, Slovenian pastoral care has been a *de facto* Catholic ministry, with few Protestants represented. Unlike the US and the UK, which have employed Muslim, Jewish and even humanist chaplains for years, there are still no non-Christian chaplains in Slovenia. Germany has also recently established multi-faith services at the federal level, including Muslim and Jewish chaplains, surpassing Slovenia in implementing inclusion. This limited diversity partly reflects Slovenia's demographic reality as a small and relatively religiously homogeneous country. However, recent changes, such as the professionalisation of the SAF, the growing number of Muslim and Orthodox members, and increased participation in multinational operations, have increased the visibility of these inclusion gaps. The legal framework allows for rapid adaptation, but recruitment challenges, small applicant pools and institutional inertia have slowed progress.

Nevertheless, there are mechanisms in place in Slovenia to informally support spiritual care across faith boundaries. The existing chaplains offer help to all members of the armed forces regardless of their religious affiliation, and the SAF facilitates access to external clergy when required. These 'mutual support' practices offer short-term solutions, but Slovenia may need to follow the example of other NATO Allies and establish part-time or reserve positions for under-represented faiths.

To summarise, the Slovenian military chaplaincy embodies the paradoxes of a modern European democracy: it is legally inclusive but practically limited, transparent in funding but limited in scope, and open to reform but slow in implementation. The clarity of legislation and secular governance provide a solid foundation that positions it well in comparison to systems bound by religious concordats. However, true inclusivity in terms of representation, access and support has still not been achieved.

In answer to the central question posed in this study, Slovenia's current chaplaincy framework upholds secular neutrality and basic pluralism in principle, but it falls short of fully meeting the ideals of pluralism and operational effectiveness when compared with its NATO Allies. The analysis suggests that further progress can be made through concrete measures. For example, appointing chaplains from currently unrepresented faiths (such as a Muslim imam and a Serbian Orthodox priest) would directly address existing gaps in equitable spiritual care, as minority faith leaders have repeatedly requested. Similarly, revisiting restrictive policies, notably the ban on dual citizens serving in the armed forces, could broaden the pool of qualified chaplaincy candidates from diverse backgrounds. Establishing formal oversight and evaluation mechanisms (for instance, a multi-faith chaplaincy council or regular performance reviews) and ensuring transparent, inclusive funding allocations are also recommended policy directions. Ultimately, while Slovenia is fulfilling its core constitutional duty to provide spiritual support, these steps would move its military chaplaincy closer to the principles of true pluralism and operational effectiveness identified at the beginning of this article.

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