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Report



Reintegrating Ukraine's Veterans

Challenges and Policy Responses

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Summary

The reintegration of the veterans of its armed forces is one of the significant challenges for Ukraine amid fighting off Russia's full-scale invasion. Historically, the state's approach to reintegrating them has been fragmented. The importance of addressing the needs of veterans and approaching the issue on a larger scale became more urgent with the first phase of the ongoing war that started in 2014, and it became even more pressing since 2022's invasion. Ukraine's ability to develop and implement a sound approach to veteran reintegration is not only a matter of giving proper recognition and support to those who fought for the country; it is also an important aspect of strengthening national defense and eventually recovery efforts.

Veteran reintegration in Ukraine encompasses several elements and faces several obstacles. Ensuring there are appropriate state capabilities remains a major challenge. When it comes to the reintegration of veterans in the economy, another challenge is the preparedness of employers to accept and welcome them. Mental and psychosocial support as well as social integration are equally important dimensions of the process that also need to be addressed. A smooth transition from military to civilian life relies on many layers of interaction with the state and with society, and in this context reintegration policies should be responsive to the diverse experiences and needs of veterans.

In recent years, government policy responses and capabilities have evolved in a positive direction, but significant shortfalls remain that must be addressed. In particular, the ability to drive and coordinate policy at the state level needs to be improved, starting with the Ministry of Veterans Affairs as the key governmental agency responsible for policy coordination.

It is key for the state to rely on evidence-based findings regarding existing efforts at veteran reintegration as well as on extensive, reliable data about the needs of veterans. This approach requires moving away from the country's long-established benefits-based support system for veterans and instead placing individual experiences at the center. Policy efforts should also include adopting a clear definition for who a veteran.

The new veterans policy that has been announced and is being developed must be truly comprehensive, acknowledging the growing diversity of veterans' experiences to ensure that Ukraine's society and economy is prepared for a situation in which there will eventually be an estimated 5-6 million former combatants.

Within the existing work on the digitalization of state services, there should be further efforts to rely on this in delivering support and benefits to veterans. The veterans policy should also acknowledge the role of veterans' family members and integrate their contribution to the process of reintegration. And the experiences of women serving in the armed forces should also be studied and an appropriate gender lens applied to the veterans' policy, recognizing the particular aspects of their contribution in serving the country.

Even with the war ongoing, Ukraine has the potential to develop policies and instruments to better address the challenges in veteran reintegration, drawing on domestic and international experiences, with support from donors and the country's civil society organizations.

Introduction

The Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) comprised about 260,000 men and women before the full-scale invasion by Russia in February 2022. They have grown considerably since, amounting to about 800,000 soldiers and about 1 million reservists. And, as a result of the ongoing war, there are now over 1.2 million veterans in Ukraine.¹ While there is no demobilization in sight, individuals are returning from military service, following injuries, due to the end of their contracts, or upon reaching the age of 60. According to projections by the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry for Veterans Affairs, there will eventually be between 5 and 6 million veterans in the country.

Since Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, there has been a significant shift in recognizing the needs of veterans. Yet, as this issue is still somewhat new to the political arena and with the number of active-duty military personnel having significantly increased, the need to develop a sound veterans policy is high. With the full-scale invasion, a much more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the roots of the problems that veterans face became even timelier. The issue of support for veterans and their reintegration after serving in the military is of crucial importance for Ukraine, and President Volodymyr Zelensky made tackling veteran reintegration one of his top priorities.

This paper emphasizes the importance of an appropriate veteran reintegration policy that is fully based on the experiences of those who have defended the country in the armed conflict started by Russia in 2014 and the full-scale invasion. It advocates the development of a comprehensive framework for the new veterans policy, with a view that institutions and processes have to improve by adapting more to the latest context and the reality that the needs of the veterans have evolved in the ongoing war experience.

The paper first looks at the evolution of Ukraine's defense sector and at the institutional development of support to veterans since independence. It then reviews the issues surrounding the assessment of veterans' needs and the problems in meeting these needs. The paper next focuses on the key matter of the legal definition of who is a veteran before reviewing the situation concerning the development of a new veterans policy and what is needed in this regard. It also looks at the important issue of the role and place of veterans in Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving support structures and resources available to veterans.

The Defense Sector Since 2014

Ukraine's defense sector underwent a significant transformation between 2014 and 2021, and even more so since the full-scale invasion in 2022. When the first phase of the war started in 2014, the state struggled to produce a coordinated military response and to deploy troops to Crimea and the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, due to a lack of capacity. As a result, civilians formed and joined volunteer military battalions, some of which were later integrated in the formal structures of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

The AFU are composed of air, land, naval, special operations, and territorial-defense forces. Being relatively new, the latter initially played a small role, but they became a crucial part of the country's defense. Several non-AFU elements also contribute, including the National Guard, which is mandated to maintain public order and national security as well as to protect the border, and has been increasingly involved in military engagements; the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), which handles counterintelligence and domestic security as well as the volunteer battalions that became prominent in 2014 and private military companies; and the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defense (GUR).

The Law on Partial Mobilization was adopted in 2014 in response to the annexation of Crimea and the fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk regions against Russian and Russian-back forces. About 105,000 people were mobilized that year and the same amount in 2015. In 2014–2015, there were six partial mobilization “waves”, a term reflecting the fact of soldiers finishing their military service rather than indicating a formal series of steps. These waves of mobilization were attempts to increase the military presence in the zone of armed conflict. In 2016, the focus shifted from mobilization to attracting recruits who would sign a contract of varying length with the AFU. This step was partly tied to Ukraine's closer alignment with NATO military training standards.

The situation changed drastically in 2022 when Zelensky decreed martial law, with general mobilization replacing the earlier partial mobilization. The decree covered citizens of conscription age (18–60 years), with the priority on those with relevant military experience and army reservists. Those mobilized are required to serve on active duty until martial law is lifted or until there is demobilization. In May 2024, the rules for mobilization became more stringent, with the age threshold lowered to 25 years and tighter rules for exceptions. The reason for this change was the need to replace soldiers either killed or in combat for over two years since the start of full-scale invasion. Zelenskyi has also said that he wanted Ukraine to have a more tech-savvy army and that younger recruits would be more suited to that.² So far, the parliament has continued to extend martial law in 90-day periods and there has been no demobilization for those who have joined the AFU since February 2022.

Institutions Dealing With Veterans

The regulation and institutionalization of veteran affairs in independent Ukraine started with the need to provide services to veterans of the Soviet-era war in Afghanistan. According to the civil society organization (CSO) Pryncyp, there were about 150,000 such veterans in Ukraine when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991.³

After independence, Ukrainian soldiers began to take part in international peacekeeping missions, starting with the mission to the former Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1995. According to one source, “Approximately 45,000 Ukrainian military personnel participated in at least 27 international peacekeeping and security operations since regaining independence.”⁴ In 2003, a brigade was sent to Iraq as part of the coalition forces, and about 1,800 service members participated in this military operation over five years, with 18 dead and 40 wounded.⁵

In 1992, the government set up the Committee of Veterans of the War in Afghanistan and Military Conflicts in Other Countries, under the Cabinet of Ministers, to manage veteran affairs. In 1993, the Law on the Status of War Veterans and Guarantees of their Social Protection was adopted. This set the first institutional framework for dealing with veterans and established social protection for individuals who had been involved in combat actions under the Soviet Union.

In 1999, the State Committee of Ukraine for Veteran Affairs, coordinated by the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, was created to manage the matters of veteran reintegration. It replaced the earlier committee and was given an expanded mandate.⁶ It ceased to exist in 2005 but was re-established in 2007 and operated until 2013. In 2014, with the fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the government began taking more steps to address the emerging needs of soldiers and veterans. The State Service for War Veterans and Participants of the Anti-Terrorist Operation was set up and coordinated by the Ministry of Social Policy.

In 2018, the Ministry for Veterans Affairs was established to shape and to implement policy to address the needs of veterans, particularly as the structures of the AFU had significantly evolved since the start of combat actions in 2014. The members of the volunteer battalion units created in response to the first phase of the war and operating independently from the AFU would also require state support given their similar experiences to that of AFU members. The ministry's primary mandate is the overall coordination of efforts on social protection for veterans and their families, including healthcare, housing, and psychosocial rehabilitation, as well as employment support. The ministry is also tasked with defining who qualifies as a veteran and creating a system of social benefits to support their growing number.

Other ministries also play a role with regard to veterans. The Ministry of Economic Development is involved in delivering relevant employment support frameworks. The Ministry of Social Policy is responsible for designing relevant social-support systems at the national and local levels. The Ministry of Health provides healthcare support.

The Ukrainian Veterans Foundation, created within the Ministry of Veterans Affairs in 2021, also has a key role in steering and implementing reintegration policy. It is meant to serve as a platform for developing and providing opportunities directly serving veterans while the ministry leads on coordination and policy aspects.

The Ministry of Defense and the AFU General Staff play an essential role in the transition of individuals from active-duty to non-active-duty service. Some determinants of the future path of veterans depend on processes and engagements during their active-duty service. For instance, the Ministry of Defense oversees across AFU structures psychosocial support, which in many cases determines the required psychosocial support in individuals' transition out of military life.

The parliament is also an important stakeholder, not only as the key body when it comes to the state budget. Its Committee on Social Policy and Veteran Rights is an important platform for elevating strategic aspects of reintegration and for legislative changes with regard to veterans' rights and needs. The parliament also holds the minister of veteran affairs accountable and is an important coordination venue for shaping veteran-related policy.

With the Ministry for Veterans Affairs only created in 2018 and the state struggling to produce a coherent and complete response to the needs of veterans, many support programs were launched and led by CSOs and civic initiatives, supported by international donors. Veteran unions and CSOs that deliver services to veterans have grown since 2014, as they often took responsibility for filling the gaps where the state was unable to provide support. Veteran Hub is one of the key providers of nonstate support in several parts of Ukraine. There are multiple regional veteran unions, which offer peer-to-peer and psychosocial support to veterans and members of their families. Legal Hundred and Pryncyp offer legal support to veterans and active-duty soldiers, and they also work to advance coherent reintegration. The number of CSOs and charitable foundations offering physical rehabilitation support has grown since 2022, with Superhumans Center, Unbroken, and Protez Foundation being examples of privately funded organizations providing support to wounded soldiers, and multiple other CSOs and private initiatives offering workforce development opportunities and psychosocial support to veterans.

In the early stages following its creation, the Ministry for Veterans Affairs drew greatly on the experiences of the United States and some European countries. The United States was one of the first donors to support veteran reintegration efforts, through the launch of Veteran Reintegration Program run by the international CSO IREX in 2018. Other important international actors in this space have included the United Nations Development Program, the International Organization for Migration, and NATO. The technical assistance programs of some donor countries, such as Canada and the United Kingdom, have included elements of veteran support. As donor involvement in Ukraine grew from 2022, new actors and organizations have taken a more active role in veteran support as part of their humanitarian efforts, often through the provision of mental-health support. Attention to veteran reintegration and appropriate state support is also a focus of Sweden's Folke Bernadotte Academy and the Council of Europe.

Legal Definition of Veterans

The growth in the number and the types of combatants since 2014 has created a new challenge for the Ministry for Veterans Affairs in defining who is a veteran with appropriate inclusivity. In 2022, the parliament adopted legislation extending social protection guarantees for veterans to members of territorial defense units. But there are still inconsistencies in the legal framework for defining veterans, which results in the exclusion of groups from the attention of the state. There is a need for the state to revise the definition and to develop potential actions for different groups of veterans.

In the current legal framework, the status of veteran is given to individuals who have engaged obtained the status of a "participant in combat actions".⁷ Article 4 of the Law on the Status of War Veterans and Guarantees of their Social Protection states that "War veterans are persons who participated in the defense of the Motherland or in hostilities on the territory of other states [and] include: participants in hostilities, persons with disabilities as a result of war, participants in war". This covers people who served in the ongoing war as well as in the Anti-Terrorist Operation/Joint Forces Operation in Donetsk and Luhansk, the Second World War, the Afghanistan War, and in peacekeeping missions, and even wounded parties at the Revolution of Dignity.

Unlike in other countries, in Ukraine veterans can include people still in the military if they have at some point participated in combat duty. Thus, a person can be considered a veteran and also be on active duty. In addition, while the law defines who is a veteran, the AFU General Staff is responsible for issuing individuals completing their military service with a document certifying they have been “participants of combat actions”.

Thus, the current definition of a veteran covers people with different past and ongoing military experiences and different needs. CSOs therefore stress the need to make the legal framework more comprehensive by segmenting veterans, under a general definition, into different categories based on these differences. The parliament has a mandate to propose legislative initiatives on fine-tuning the definition of a veteran but it is not currently the driver of change as the Ministry of Veterans Affairs is expected to steer this.

Assessing Veterans' Needs

The military roles and experiences of those who served in the Afghanistan War, in peacekeeping missions, and in defending Ukraine since 2014 have been different, but all of them are legally entitled to social protection from the state. The changes in the structure of the Armed Forces of Ukraine have been accompanied by first steps in acknowledging the contribution of the country's new defenders.

In 2020, a poll on the needs of veterans was carried out by the international nongovernmental organization IREX, and its findings were widely shared and considered across the governmental and nongovernmental structures concerned.⁸ This was the first comprehensive attempt to capture veterans' needs as well as society's perception of veterans, and it revealed the challenges and struggles faced by veterans. Among respondents, 23% said they had returned to their previous employment after military service while 42% said they had taken different jobs. This suggests the importance of creating new career-transition opportunities for veterans that will allow them to apply the skills gained in the military or to facilitate career changes that will ease their integration in civilian life. The poll also found that active-duty veterans were more economically secure compared to those returning from service, who can struggle to keep a job.⁹ Veterans still on active duty receive generous financial benefits from the government but less generous ones when they go back to civilian life. The results suggested the need for employment-support programs for veterans. About 60% of non-active duty veterans said they experienced difficulties in their transition to civilian life. This suggests that even at the time, after the first phase of war, there was critical need for tailor-made veteran support. More generally, however, the findings can no longer be considered fully applicable due to the changing nature of veterans' needs since the full-scale invasion.¹⁰

Since 2022, the Ukrainian Veterans Foundation has carried out research on the nature of veterans and on the role of the state in providing support to them. Similarly to the IREX polls, its findings have highlighted the challenges veterans face in the employment market. The foundation's research also revealed that the majority of veterans negatively evaluated the state support they received and said that they faced obstacles at the level of the local administration when receiving services.

In 2023, the International Organization for Migration carried out a survey on the social integration of veterans, with a strong focus on those with disabilities.¹¹ It partially tackled some of the most recent veteran needs. The survey suggested that veterans were unaware of the state structures and institutions that may offer them support, with 48.4 % saying they knew about the measures that the Ministry of Veterans Affairs offered. The poll also found that 21% said they trusted the ministry, whereas 40% said they fully trusted veteran unions and CSOs. From the perspective of social reintegration of veterans, 52% of respondents said they did not feel that their sense of belonging to the community had changed after completion of their military service. Regarding social interactions in their family units, 36% said that they had improved, while 8% reported deterioration of their relationship with family and friends. According to the study, physical and mental health burdens likely contributed to the deterioration. At the same time, over 80% of veterans noted that family was an important factor for their social integration.

Problems in Meeting Needs

Before the full-scale invasion, the Ministry for Veterans Affairs had made significant strides in establishing a legal framework and a benefits-based system of support for veterans. But its efforts were often constrained by outdated legislation and insufficient resources. Many of the guarantees of social protection made by the state, such as concerning the provision of housing, were difficult to deliver fully or partially, which resulted in a mismatch between anticipated support and state capacity to deliver it. Additionally, the legal definition of a veteran dating back to 1993 was convoluted and was not appropriate to the latest context.

Thus, as of February 2022, the ministry had laid the groundwork for veteran support but the scope of its mandate and its effectiveness in providing comprehensive services to all veterans were still evolving. The situation was summarized in 2023 by a group of CSOs—Legal Hundred, Pryncyp, Space of Opportunities, Veteran Hub, and Veteranka—and experts that published a Concept of Policy Towards Veterans and Their Family Members.¹² They stressed three key problems that date back to the 1993 Law on the Status of War Veterans and Guarantees of their Social Protection:

- o An outdated legal framework regulating veterans' reintegration.
- o Often unrealistic state guarantees of social benefits for veterans.
- o The challenge of defining who is a veteran complicates policy implementation.

In August 2024, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs signed a memorandum of cooperation with the five CSOs.¹³

According to these CSOs, the legal framework aims to generate a social-benefits system for veterans. This approach largely stems from the Soviet tradition of benefits-based systems in which citizens expect the state to provide them with services as a way of acknowledgment of their contribution to the state and society—in this case for protecting Ukraine's territorial integrity. This approach in which everyone qualifying as a veteran gets the same benefits contrasts with needs-based support where the different needs and relevant experiences of individuals are placed at the center of the system. The legal framework was thus not designed to establish a policy

that would comprehensively reflect the diverse needs of veterans. Furthermore, it does not address the question of veterans' need for appreciation for their service and for respect.

The 1993 Law on the Status of War Veterans and Guarantees of their Social Protection has undergone over 20 modifications since its adoption, with revisions regarding the categories of veterans. As part of these changes, the procedure for receiving "participant of hostilities" status was revised several times, aiming to simplify it. The state also took on the responsibility to provide free psychosocial support to veterans. In 2020, the Law on the Status and Guarantees to Volunteer Combatants was adopted, acknowledging the contribution of this category of Ukraine's defenders.¹⁴ However, especially given the changes in the military context since 2014, there is still no comprehensive policy to cover the needs of the different categories of veterans, including for current active-duty military personnel when eventually they end their service or when there is demobilization—for example, by differentiating based on the specific nature and duration of service—and to put an appropriate support system in place.

A New Veterans Policy

There is no clarity at this point on what benefits or social protection veterans will be entitled to, given the relatively limited progress made by the state structures so far. The matter of veteran support and reintegration remains somewhat on the margins of the state's attention compared to other existential issues that Ukraine is struggling with, not least the focus on equipping the military. This is despite the president's claims of prioritizing veterans. A full debate on the needs of veterans and a comprehensive overall approach to supporting them is still needed. Despite the efforts by the state to expand the definition of a veteran and to include new categories of people who have participated in combat in the defense of Ukraine, the legislative framework requires further development.

An important step was taken in November 2024 when the Cabinet of Ministers approved a Veterans Policy Strategy for the period until 2030 and an implementation plan to 2027.¹⁵ The Ministry of Veterans Affairs, alongside the CSOs behind the 2023 concept on which the strategy is based, presented this in December. The document has not been made public, but it is being discussed with key veteran CSOs and individual veterans to integrate their views. The ministry also announced there would be further joint steps for the policy's development and implementation. Sources interviewed say there has been considerable progress made in policy development, but the steps had not been approved at the time of writing.

The strategy is intended to be a "living document" covering veterans' interactions with the state, based on three principles:

- o Human capital recovery and veteran welfare—covering coordination efforts on physical and mental health of veterans, family support, and provision of the state guarantees as well as boosting employment and reinforcement of entrepreneurship among veterans.
- o Respect and tribute—covering activities aimed at amplifying the important role of the country's defenders in society, including ways of commemorating their contribution.

- o Ensuring national security and defence capacities—covering military preparedness measures to be introduced in schools where veterans would be involved as teachers, as well as veteran protection rights.¹⁶

The Veterans Policy Strategy could ensure comprehensive changes in veteran support and reintegration. For example, supporting the families of veterans is recognized and is aimed at for the first time.

The new policy will have to incorporate tackling a wide range of issues holistically, with the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, other key state stakeholders, and nonstate actors taking an active role. The ministry is expected to take the lead on the implementation of the new policy, and there are some positive signs of its latest leadership taking a proactive role in advancing the policy across the government structures. The ministry has up to now made sporadic efforts aimed at coordinating service delivery at the local level and focusing on physical rehabilitation, but there is still quite a lot of progress to be achieved on coordination across different ministries.

One reason the different attempts to address veteran issues in recent years did not lead to the adoption of an effective policy is that the Ministry for Veterans Affairs underwent many internal changes. Between February and September 2024, there was only an acting minister who had a somewhat diminished leadership role, including in coordination with other relevant bodies. The current minister, Nataliya Kalmykova, is understandably still to demonstrate an ability to deliver results, but the CSOs involved in the development of the new veterans policy assess positively her initial attempts to take the lead.

As a result of the inconsistency in the Ministry for Veterans Affairs, other ministries have taken the initiative in developing certain aspects of the new policy. This is also partly due to their desire to being seen as pioneers in the development and delivery of policy. In 2023, the Ministry of Economy launched a sizable program to promote veteran entrepreneurship, which offers state grants for opening and developing businesses. The Ministry of Social Policy was at the core of revising the frameworks of the social protection for veterans. There have been ongoing debates in the government about reshuffling responsibilities and even about dissolving the Ministry for Veterans Affairs.

What Is Needed

The widened scope of military experiences of Ukraine's veterans requires a profound reintegration response, not only through medical and psychosocial support but also in the involvement of their family members in the process. It is critical to start with a clearer understanding of the needs of veterans, to be followed by creating a responsive support system and promoting their smooth psychosocial and employment integration of veterans. Strategic thinking should cover national-level experience and learning as well as engage the international community in developing a responsive system for reintegration. The aim should not only be to ensure a fair treatment for veterans but also to maintain social cohesion in the country and prevent any radicalization of former combatants as a result of an inadequate response to their needs.

Box 1. Veterans, Recovery, and Reconstruction

Only after the implementation of a comprehensive demobilization process in which veterans do not face bureaucratic challenges, as noted, can appropriate discussions take place about what contribution they can make to Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction efforts. These discussions must also be fully inclusive of veteran voices. The varied experiences of veterans can be relevant for many sectors of the economy, but the right mechanisms to bring these to bear have to be carefully designed first.

The issue of veteran reintegration is closely tied to that of recovery and reconstruction, in the context of the importance of human capital and social cohesion. The state of the workforce and of the labor market has changed since the start of the full-scale invasion, with millions relocating to peaceful countries and uncertainty as to how many of them will return in the near term. The ongoing martial law and general mobilization, as well as the fact of many volunteering to join the military effort, inevitably has major effects on the situation.

There is an ongoing debate on the country's human capital, and there will likely be a backlash towards migrants replenishing the workforce in a largely homogenous country. The human capital within the AFU has evolved substantially since 2014, especially with the move to a contract model, in which service members are being trained to be more professional and have more skills as a result. When general mobilization came in 2022, the AFU was therefore comprised of professionally trained soldiers, called-up reservists, and a growing number of civilian volunteers. As a result, the experience acquired by those in the AFU has become more diverse.

For these reasons, the state is starting to think about how to tap the labor potential of people who have finished serving in the military. It has begun to take steps in this direction with the launch of grants for veteran entrepreneurship and retraining and reskilling programs introduced by the Ministry of Economy. In addition, the physical rehabilitation of veterans is now prioritized as a way to help them return smoothly to the employment market. The CSO Veteran Hub has analyzed the military experiences that veterans gain in combat and integrated them into a comprehensive guide so that veterans and state structures can gain a better understanding of how combat-related experiences could be integrated into the employment market.

However, the state should not impose the expectation on veterans to immediately participate in the country's economic reconstruction. The Ministry of Economy recognizes the employment challenges for the population. Social tensions may increase with the return of veterans from military service to aggravated market conditions, and the state should take pre-emptive measures in this regard. Without a proper psychosocial support system, professional and educational training, and a recognition of the efforts of Ukraine's defenders, a narrative suggesting the immediate engagement of veterans in the economy is unlikely to meet its goal. Appropriate expectations must be set when it comes to their role and contribution in the context of the recovery and reconstruction processes.

Given that there have already been, for example, many instances of discharge from service due to war-related disability, the death of a family member in combat, and individuals reaching the age of 60, there are several different groups of veterans whose varied combat experiences should be studied in order to inform the steps in the eventual process of demobilization. Some of the issues that individuals experienced during active duty also affect their later experiences as veterans. For example, the different types of weaponry used on the battlefield may have different long-term psychosocial effects. Therefore, comprehensive surveying of the needs of veterans that looks at their active-duty service as well as their experiences as veterans is needed on a regular basis. The data should help the state in formulating and updating its approaches to veteran support and facilitate achieving the goals of reintegration.

As noted, the current legal definition of a veteran covers members of the military who have served in active duty. Those choosing to continue with their military career rather than return to civilian life after active duty also deserve appropriate accompaniment in their transition process, and a set of particular entitlements should be envisaged for them. For example, they will require new skills and retraining to operate the Western military weapons supplied by Ukraine's partners.

Three years since the start of the full-scale invasion, military service for many is getting longer, with rotations lasting only a few days. Seeing family members for a limited period and facing health issues as a result of combat experiences are likely to result in mental and physical health challenges as well as veterans disconnecting from their family. Engaging psychologists, psychotherapists and physical health professionals; bringing family members into the veteran reintegration process; and identifying opportunities for career guidance and social support systems are ways to advance a human-centered approach to reintegration.¹⁷

It is also key to consider the needs of women veterans and to apply a gender lens to the veterans policy. Gender diversity in the AFU has grown. According to a 2024 study, there were 67,000 female service members in the AFU, constituting 8% of the total, including 48,000 military personnel with over 7,000 in officer positions and 5,000 holding a senior rank. There are over 10,000 women serving in the frontline.¹⁸ Female service members joined AFU structures voluntarily as mobilization applies to males only. In the context of reintegration, there are healthcare needs that are specific to female and male veterans, and the needs for holistic support may differ among the two groups too.

Addressing these problems will require not only new approaches to rehabilitation but a systemic approach to welcoming veterans back into civilian life, studying their combat-related experiences and subsequent expectations for civilian life. Responsibility for these efforts should extend substantially beyond the Ministry of Veterans Affairs as there are multiple support elements involved.

From the perspective of international aid, a complex multi-element program on veteran needs is necessary to ensure a cohesive approach and appropriate support to state and nonstate actors involved, and to step in where the government may not have sufficient human and budgetary capacity to act.

At the same time, governmental structures could develop a deeper cooperation framework with CSOs and integrate their findings into state initiatives. In the past few years, there has been a lack of consultative processes in the development of legislation and action plans with nonstate actors. A holistic system of veteran support should be inclusive of the role of CSOs and unions, whose expertise and experiences can provide significant inputs for a sounder understanding of the veterans context and aggregated data to inform the shaping of the new veterans policy. It is therefore important to amplify and integrate the voice of nonstate actors and recognize their achievements in advancing changes for veterans.

It is critical to prepare the fundamental groundwork in the realm of social cohesion first. This will entail a comprehensive demobilization process in which veterans will not face bureaucratic challenges but enjoy comprehensive state support. Therefore, the development of a roadmap for the transition from military to civilian life, and a clear awareness of the responsibilities across government agencies with a leadership role, should help advance the process in an optimal direction.

It is critical to prepare the fundamental groundwork in the realm of social cohesion first.

In the United States, the Journeys of Veterans Map, a framework that traces the path of individuals in the military from their combat experience to becoming a civilian, was developed in 2020 to reflect the overall life experience of veterans.²² Following this example, the CSO Veteran Hub has carried out a similar exercise to study the life experiences of veterans in Ukraine, and to give a comprehensive overview of the gaps and areas where the authorities could step in.²³ Developed before the full-scale invasion and later revised, Veteran Hub's approach considers new challenges that veterans may face over their lifetime. The findings provide useful insight into the situation of veterans and for further developing a policy on their reintegration. They suggest that veterans undergo unique experiences before military service, during it, in the process of their transition to civilian life, and during retirement. The Journeys of Veterans Map tailored to the Ukrainian context thus emphasizes that wartime experience is only one of many experiences that veterans undergo. The different identities that veterans may take on before, during, and after military service, and the specific features of each of these are key factors to consider in developing reintegration and readaptation practices.²⁴

Digitalization is one of the tools that the state uses to address veteran needs. Veterans can see the data on their benefits on the Diia app for state services. In 2023, the Ministry for Veterans Affairs launched an online tool for the registration of veterans, allowing the government to establish their number, to project the amount of wounded and sick, and to align policy initiatives accordingly. The Ministry for Veterans Affairs is working on developing a one-stop-shop digital tool for veteran services at the community level, but it is unclear who the beneficiaries will eventually be, given the lack of clarity about categories of veterans. But digitalization so far has served the state rather than its direct beneficiaries. E-services have a significant potential to enhance service delivery for veterans and planning. Until now, there are useful features that highlight veterans' specific circumstances and allow analysis of their needs. In case of effective integration of the e-registry, ministries dealing with veteran reintegration could use the data to ensure that veterans can access the services relevant to their individual circumstances.

At the same time, governmental structures could develop a deeper cooperation framework with CSOs and integrate their findings into state initiatives. In the past few years, there has been a lack of consultative processes in the development of legislation and action plans with nonstate actors. A holistic system of veteran support should be inclusive of the role of CSOs and unions, whose expertise and experiences can provide significant inputs for a sounder understanding of the veterans context and aggregated data to inform the shaping of the new veterans policy. It is therefore important to amplify and integrate the voice of nonstate actors and recognize their achievements in advancing changes for veterans.

It is critical to prepare the fundamental groundwork in the realm of social cohesion first. This will entail a comprehensive demobilization process in which veterans will not face bureaucratic challenges but enjoy comprehensive state support. Therefore, the development of a roadmap for the transition from military to civilian

Box 2. The Experience of Denmark

The Scandinavian countries offer good models for how to handle veteran reintegration. There, those who fall under the definition of a veteran are entitled to receive lifelong psychosocial support as well as social and employment counseling.²⁵ Denmark, in particular is known for its more sophisticated support system for veterans.²⁶ While the two countries' context are very different—for example, in terms of the size of the state, the military's level of professionalization, and the profile of veterans—Denmark offers useful lessons for Ukraine when it comes to trying to understand the experience of veterans and how to support them.

There were about 40,400 veterans in Denmark as of July 2022. The state recognizes the social responsibility for reintegration of the members of the military who participated in combat. While Norway and Sweden integrate veterans into civilian support systems immediately after they leave the military, in Denmark the Ministry of Defense leads the support efforts.

Denmark's first veterans policy was adopted in 2010 following the growing international interventions of its armed forces after the end of the Cold War. The current policy was introduced in 2016.²⁷ It highlights the goal of remaining in contact with veterans after their military service so that appropriate support will be provided and delivered.²⁸ The state maintains contact with veterans through health checks, informational letters, surveys, and veteran meetings.

Implementation of the veterans policy is assigned to the Danish Veteran Center, within the Ministry of Defense. The center offers four types of services: treatment, counseling support, honoring, and research. It continuously studies the experiences of veterans in three phases: before, during, and after combat. This allows the state to determine the issues veterans face, to set implementation priorities, and to prepare appropriate response mechanisms. The center focuses on the following areas of veteran needs: treatment, screening, prevention, and reintegration. This allows the state to establish practices that cover physical and psychosocial needs. The reintegration component also tracks and covers the needs of homeless veterans.

life, and a clear awareness of the responsibilities across government agencies with a leadership role, should help advance the process in an optimal direction.

In the United States, the Journeys of Veterans Map, a framework that traces the path of individuals in the military from their combat experience to becoming a civilian, was developed in 2020 to reflect the overall life experience of veterans.¹⁹ Following this example, the CSO Veteran Hub has carried out a similar exercise to study the life experiences of veterans in Ukraine, and to give a comprehensive overview of the gaps and areas where the authorities could step in.²⁰ Developed before the full-scale invasion and later revised, Veteran Hub's approach considers new challenges that veterans may face over their lifetime. The findings provide useful insight into the situation of veterans and for further developing a policy on their reintegration. They suggest that veterans undergo unique experiences before military service, during it, in the process of their transition to civilian life, and

The regularly commissioned research by the Danish Veteran Center established that one-in-ten veterans experiences symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that appear seven months after returning from deployment. The center offers different types of therapy for treating PTSD: cognitive therapy, couple therapy, body therapy, and mindfulness. It also uses virtual reality to help veterans overcome triggering moments of the PTSD. According to its data, 60% report a reduction in symptoms after undergoing PTSD treatment.

Civil society organizations lead peer-to-peer support and recreational activities for veterans. For instance, the Rotary Club established the nonprofit organization Veteranshaven, a recreational site of a garden where veterans not only have a chance to pursue and develop gardening skills but are equally welcome to participate in regular events. Veteranshaven invites family members to participate in social events for veterans as well so that the integration process can encompass whole family units.²⁹ It also operates as a social enterprise where veterans are encouraged to learn gardening skills and set new ways and approaches in civilian lives.

The approach to veterans in Denmark aligns with broader recognition of this community in the country. The importance of veterans is recognized through honoring practices. September 5 is National Flag Day for the armed forces, a date with no historic significance that was chosen for political elites and the public to honor and commemorate the contribution of veterans. A parade takes place outside the parliament building and is attended by the highest political leadership of the country, recognizing the value of veterans in society.

Aside from such commemorative practice, there is one of provision of entitlements for veterans. For instance, public employers may give preferential treatment to injured veterans while private employers may receive financial compensation for hiring veterans.

during retirement. The Journeys of Veterans Map tailored to the Ukrainian context thus emphasizes that wartime experience is only one of many experiences that veterans undergo. The different identities that veterans may take on before, during, and after military service, and the specific features of each of these are key factors to consider in developing reintegration and readaptation practices.²¹

Digitalization is one of the tools that the state uses to address veteran needs. Veterans can see the data on their benefits on the Diia app for state services. In 2023, the Ministry for Veterans Affairs launched an online tool for the registration of veterans, allowing the government to establish their number, to project the amount of wounded and sick, and to align policy initiatives accordingly. The Ministry for Veterans Affairs is working on developing a one-stop-shop digital tool for veteran services at the community level, but it is unclear who the beneficiaries will eventually be, given the lack of clarity about categories of veterans. But digitalization so far has served the state rather than its direct beneficiaries. E-services have a significant potential to enhance service delivery for veterans and planning. Until now, there are useful features that highlight veterans' specific circumstances and allow analysis of their needs. In case of effective integration of the e-registry, ministries dealing with veteran reintegration could use the data to ensure that veterans can access the services relevant to their individual circumstances.

Whether the state succeeds in reassessing the needs of the veterans and stressing the importance of their reintegration will also determine the response from society and its level of appreciation of veterans. Upon leaving military service, any heroization of the efforts made by veterans to defend the country may be overshadowed by issues that are likely to arise, ranging from experiencing traumatic episodes or an inability to adjust to the new reality. In the worst-case scenario, there may be a rise in criminal activity by some veterans and the risk of radicalization of some of them. Therefore, acknowledgment and communication of the importance of the service of Ukraine's defenders is highly important.

Recommendations

Establish a clear legal definition of who is a veteran

Ukraine needs to better align its definition of a who is a veteran with the context of the ongoing war and the more complex structure of the AFU. A clear understanding of the varied profiles of veterans will allow the authorities to develop the new policy for them and to study their needs in line with the latest developments.

Family members should be included in the veterans policy

While the benefits-based system primarily targets veterans, it is important to consider the inclusion of their family members into support systems for them. With thousands of soldiers at the front lines, as well as thousands of deceased, it is important that the veterans policy recognize the essential role that family members of veterans can play in the psychosocial support system for them.

State-commissioned research should inform appropriate responses in the veterans policy

The Ministry of Veterans Affairs should develop its policies and approaches based on appropriate research that is updated on regular basis. To date, only the Ukrainian Veterans Foundation has commissioned research about veterans, but this has been limited to small survey groups of 1,000 veterans. There is limited strategic vision for in-house research practices in the line ministries. However, the scale of the war as well as the complexity of the physical traumas and psychosocial needs of veterans make it a necessity. In the case of Denmark, for example, the development of the approach to PTSD and its long-term impact on veterans, as well as ongoing practices in psychosocial support, was informed by such previously commissioned national research. In Ukraine, research is largely commissioned by international organizations, as part of international development projects, and by CSOs. The lack of coordination and strategic end goal when it comes to research within the state structures is a clear gap for the country.

The Ministry of Veterans Affairs should lead an effective model of coordination across ministries

With the several different elements that fall under the umbrella of veteran reintegration, it is important to have a functional Ministry of Veterans Affairs with the necessary degree of agency and leadership in policy development. In postwar recovery processes, institutional stability, leadership, and ability to respond to the ongoing needs of veterans will determine the success of the reintegration efforts.

Digitalization should be seen as the way to enhance service delivery for veterans

With the existing e-registry, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs should coordinate delivery of different services using e-tools. Digitalization has significant potential to simplify the interaction of veterans with the state, which is why further functionalities should be developed and fine-tuned to integrate those expectations.

Reintegration should be approached with the relevant gender lenses

The specific needs and military experiences of people of different gender should inform reintegration practices. These should primarily extend to physical and mental health support so as to better facilitate the reintegration of women, and LGBTQ+ combatants.

Honoring and commemoration practice should be improved

Independence Day (August 24) and the recently established National Defender's Day (October 14) have been set as moment to acknowledge the national contribution of Ukraine's defenders. However, the country's honoring and commemoration practices require an even more profound and nuanced approach by the state. For example, in the past years, building a National Military Cemetery has been discussed, but without any clear result. The state should develop and adopt guidelines for the commemoration of those who served the country militarily during and beyond the full-scale invasion, with veterans appropriately consulted and their agreement required.

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