

The Long Shadow of Donbas

Reintegrating Veterans and Fostering Social Cohesion in Ukraine

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Almost 400,000 veterans who fought on the Ukrainian side in Donbas have since returned to communities all over the country. They are one of the most visible representations of the societal changes in Ukraine following the violent conflict in the east of the country. Ukrainian society faces the challenge of making room for these former soldiers and their experiences. At the same time, the Ukrainian government should recognize veterans as an important political stakeholder group. Even though Ukraine is simultaneously struggling with internal reforms and Russian destabilization efforts, political actors in Ukraine need to step up their efforts to formulate and implement a coherent policy on veteran reintegration. The societal stakes are too high to leave the issue unaddressed.



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Executive Summary

Almost 400,000 veterans who fought on the Ukrainian side in Donbas have since returned to communities all over the country. These former soldiers constitute an important societal and political stakeholder. While Ukraine is simultaneously struggling with internal reforms and Russian destabilization efforts, the reintegration of these veterans constitutes a critical determinant for the country's future.

The reintegration measures currently in place are insufficient. They take the form of state-sponsored social benefits that government officials, civil society actors and veterans alike consider inadequate. Not only are these benefits outdated, they can also be hard to access. Given the administrative hurdles to receiving veteran status, the exact number of Donbas veterans is unknown and no relevant socio-demographic data has been systematically collected.

Some of the most significant challenges veterans face involve the complex system of healthcare provisions, as well as the absence of a comprehensive policy to support psychosocial rehabilitation. A difficult economic climate, paired with employers' pronounced biases, has led to a situation in which many veterans have difficulties finding a job that provides a sense of purpose and helps establish a new routine. As a consequence, veterans often struggle with problems including substance abuse, aggression and suicidal tendencies.

There are three major obstacles to the successful reintegration of veterans in Ukraine: 1) the lack of ministerial capacity and intra-governmental cooperation, 2) the inadequately addressed risk of political marginalization and radicalization and 3) increasing societal divisions leading to the alienation of veterans as a social group.

Administratively, the Ukrainian Ministry of Veteran Affairs (MoVA) has insufficient political buy-in, funding and administrative reach to formulate and implement a comprehensive strategy for veteran reintegration. In addition, cooperation with Ukraine's powerful Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) remains a challenge.

On a political level, veteran alienation poses the risk of driving a subset of veterans into the arms of radical actors. This radicalized fringe currently dominates the conversation on veterans' political views, which makes the general population suspicious of all veterans. On a social level, local communities have not sufficiently addressed reintegration. Existing stereotypes of veterans increasingly translate into discrimination. As a consequence, veterans often restrict their close personal associations to their comrades-in-arms, which enhances the risk of creating social enclaves.

Political actors in Ukraine need to step up their efforts to formulate and implement a coherent policy on veteran reintegration. While veteran affairs are complex and the Ukrainian government's resources are limited, the societal stakes are too high to leave this issue unaddressed. Most urgently:

- Ukraine's ministries should address veteran reintegration **by establishing a program with clearly defined deliverables** which will continue **until its targets are met**.
- Ukraine's Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Verkhovna Rada should **increase the MoVA's funding and staff**, both in Kyiv and in its regional offices.
- The MoVA, in cooperation with the MoD and the MoIA, needs to **address data gaps** regarding veterans in order to formulate a coherent policy and to counter stereotypes.
- Government, civil society and international actors should **strengthen community engagement between civilians and veterans** to avoid the creation of social enclaves. A conversation about the reintegration of Donbas is essential and cannot be left to radical groups with the loudest voices.
- The Ukrainian Ministry of Health (MoH) and the MoVA should strengthen their **provisions for both physical and mental healthcare** for veterans.
- **International actors should invest more political and financial capital** in veteran reintegration in Ukraine and disentangle veteran programming from the conflict zone.

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Introduction

The violent conflict in eastern Ukraine that erupted after the uprising in Kyiv's Maidan Square between November 2013 and February 2014 and the illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 has altered the fabric of Ukrainian society. Along with 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)¹ and a death toll of approximately 13,000 people,² the nearly 400,000 Ukrainian veterans³ who have already returned from the frontline are one of the most visible representations of this societal change. Since the conflict is highly localized in the Donbas region, it remains invisible to many Ukrainians. Injured and disabled veterans, who suffer from a variety of visible and invisible traumas, are one of the few reminders that the conflict is still ongoing. Ukrainian society faces the challenge of making room for these former soldiers and their experiences.

Veterans are also important political stakeholders: while a political resolution to the conflict remains elusive,⁴ veteran support will be crucial for any potential peace agreement in Donbas. Taking into account the interests of those directly affected by the conflict will significantly increase the acceptance and sustainability of an agreement. Veterans' (re-)integration into both their communities and broader Ukrainian society will be critical for Ukraine's future.

The High Political and Societal Stakes of Reintegration

If the Ukrainian government fails to provide adequate conditions under which veterans can (re-)integrate into civilian life, it risks marginalizing these ex-combatants, which could increase the appeal of radical groups. Marginalization can also lead to self-harm or violent behavior, as was sadly demonstrated recently, when a veteran set himself on fire in Kyiv's city center in opposition to troop withdrawals in Donbas.⁵ Such tragedies will likely multiply. The social divides taking shape between veterans and civilians have the potential to wreak havoc in many communities.

Nevertheless, there are clear opportunities for Ukraine to foster social cohesion if the government takes the challenge of reintegrating Ukrainian veterans of the Donbas

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- 1 "Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)," UNHCR Ukraine, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/internally-displaced-persons>.
 - 2 OHCHR, *Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 16 November 2019 to 15 February 2020*, March 12, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/29thReportUkraine_EN.pdf.
 - 3 Interview with senior MoVA official, September 15, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.
 - 4 "Small Steps Along the Contact Line: Local Approaches to Peace in Donbas," PeaceLab Blog, October 9, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://peacelab.blog/2020/10/small-steps-along-the-contact-line-local-approaches-to-peace-in-donbas>.
 - 5 "Donbas War Veteran, Who Set Himself on Fire on Kyiv's Maidan, Died," *Kyiv Post*, October 14, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/donbas-war-veteran-who-set-himself-on-fire-on-kyivs-maidan-died.html>.

conflict seriously and addresses societal and political frictions. A serious approach to societal tensions will also lay the groundwork for the potential future reintegration of separatist veterans, which will be a much more demanding task.

The responsibility for successful reintegration does not lie solely with the government – it is both a societal and a deeply individual process. On a societal level, reintegration requires civilians, veterans and other groups affected by the war to relearn how to live as neighbors and how to peacefully interact with one another in their communities. At the same time, reintegration is a personal experience, and each individual veteran has a responsibility to find their place in civilian life. If provided with the conditions for successful reintegration, veterans are well positioned to be a force for good in their communities.

Successful Reintegration Requires a More Nuanced Understanding of the Challenges

Conscious of the fact that veteran reintegration is an important issue facing contemporary Ukraine, this study attempts to outline realistic ways of tackling this challenge in the immediate future. First, we examine the practical difficulties that arise in organizing and administering support for veterans. Second, we analyze the underlying bureaucratic, political and social obstacles that either cause or reinforce these challenges. Finally, we propose ways to mitigate these obstacles.

Ukrainian veterans are a heterogeneous group. Their lives before the conflict were diverse: many were civilians before taking up arms, while others were trained military professionals. They come from an array of socio-economic backgrounds, and they range in age from their early twenties to early retirement. Veterans also had a variety of motivations for joining the fight in Donbas. Some were political activists during the Maidan protest movement and had fought for democratic change. Some saw it as their patriotic duty to defend their country. For others, the war represented a chance to earn money or was part of their duty as military professionals. Some had worked as guns-for-hire before the war. Still others considered the conflict part of a far-right ideological war. For most Donbas veterans, there were a mixture of reasons behind their decision to join the conflict. In practice, this confluence of motivations means that each veteran has different preconditions for reintegration. Just as they had distinct experiences of the war, each veteran has an individual experience of reintegration.

In this report, we use the term “veteran” to describe the approximately 400,000 people who have participated in combat on the Ukrainian side since 2014, during either the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) or the Joint Forces Operation (JFO).⁶ Some of these veterans are still active service members, working for the MoD, the MoIA or the National Guard in various capacities. Some have returned to the conflict zone after their initial demobilization and are either continuing their military service or engaging in public and volunteer activities related to the conflict.⁷ Others have returned to their previous jobs or taken up a new civilian life. Veteran reintegration is typically considered part

6 The official name for the Ukrainian combat operation in eastern Ukraine was the “Anti-Terrorist Operation” (ATO) between 2014 and 2018, and has been the “Joint Forces Operation” (JFO) since 2018.

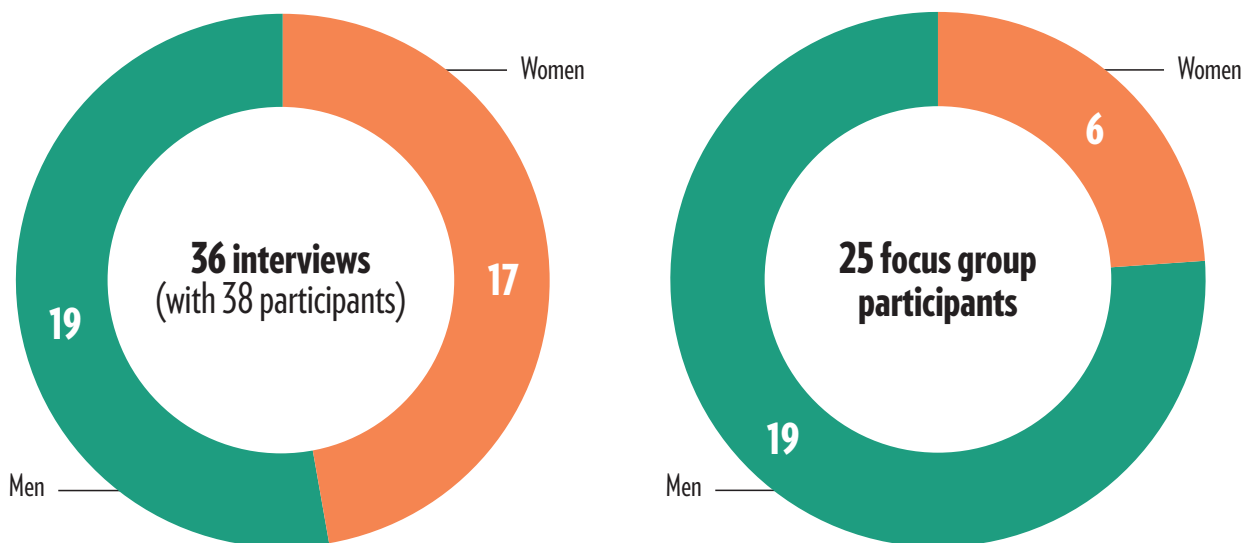
7 Results of focus groups interviews, conducted October 3–12, 2020, by the Razumkov Center, Kyiv.

of the measures aimed at “Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration” (DDR), as per United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16.⁸ While international DDR experience has much to offer in the Balkans and other post-Soviet countries, it needs to be contextualized for Ukraine – most notably because DDR measures are usually implemented post-conflict.

Investigating Different Perspectives on Reintegration

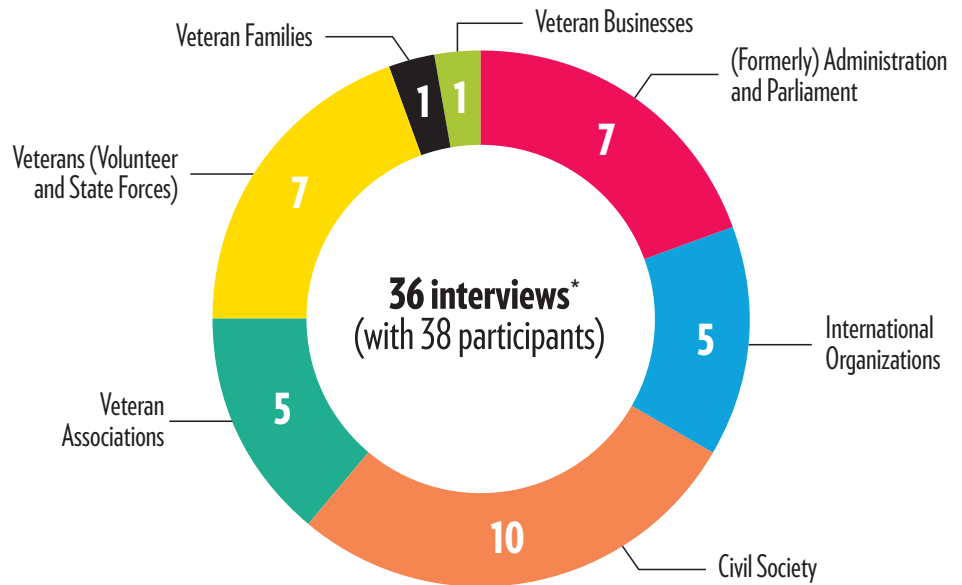
This report employs a qualitative research approach. It centers on a total of 36 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and three focus-group interviews with veterans. Key stakeholders included returned veterans who fought on the Ukrainian side in Donbas, ministry officials, international organizations active in Ukraine, veteran unions, and civil society actors. Additionally, we conducted desk research and a literature review, as well as engaging in background conversations with international experts. A Ukrainian partner with extensive experience reporting on the conflict in Donbas assisted us in identifying interviewees and provided translation when necessary. We implemented a snowball technique to identify veterans. We endeavored to include a diverse set of voices in terms of regions, socio-economic backgrounds and sex. However, our sample is biased toward veterans who are active members of their communities and live in regional capitals.

Figure 1: Gender Distribution Among Interviewees and Focus Group Participants



⁸ United Nations Sustainable Development, “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions – Sustainable Development Goals,” accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>.

Figure 2: Distribution of Interviewees According to Stakeholder Groups

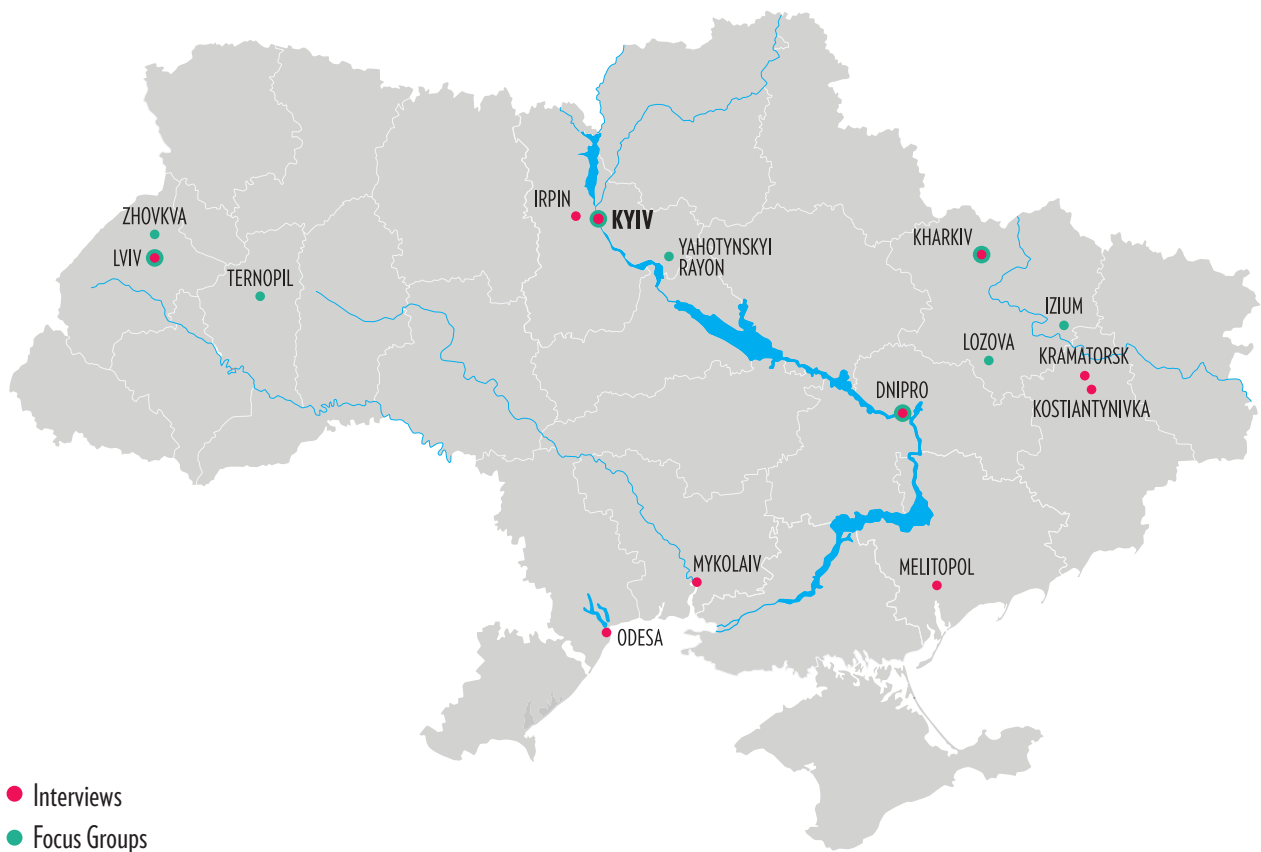


*With the exception of veteran families, all groups interviewed for this research also included veterans.

Between August and October 2020, we conducted in-depth interviews with 17 women and 19 men from 10 different cities in western, southern and eastern Ukraine, as well as in and around Kyiv. The Razumkov Center, the Ukrainian sociological institute we commissioned to conduct focus groups with veterans, held sessions with ex-combatants from western Ukraine (in and around Lviv), eastern Ukraine (in and around Kharkiv), and in and around Kyiv in October 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews except the focus group in Kyiv happened online.

In addition to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, several other limitations should be kept in mind for this report. First, we excluded veterans who fought on the other side of the contact line because this additional focus lies beyond the scope of this report. Nevertheless, the reintegration challenges these ex-combatants face will be a crucial issue in the future. Second, we faced difficulties accessing ministries such as the MoD, which formally declined our various requests for interviews. Third, the individual makeup of the research team had a number of effects on the interview results. With only one Russian speaker and no one fluent in Ukrainian, conversations were less direct due to the need for translation. Our gender, age and experience also impacted our relations with some of the interviewees. As we are young women without military experience, some of our male counterparts did not take us seriously or made suggestive comments. Our background as foreign (German) researchers also created imbalances. Some saw us as outsiders unable to understand Ukraine, while others were aware of Ukraine's economic dependence on countries such as Germany.

Figure 3: Regional Distribution of Interviews and Focus Groups



In this report, we begin by describing how today’s veterans became soldiers in the first place as well as the ways in which the dynamics at the onset of the conflict in Donbas continue to affect reintegration. Chapter 2 also highlights how veterans’ place in Ukrainian society evolved prior to 2014. In chapter 3, we describe and analyze reintegration in terms of the current system, key actors, and standard practices, identifying where it currently falls short of meeting reintegration needs. Our subsequent analysis (chapter 4) of the underlying causes of these shortcomings is split into three parts, reflecting the main types of challenges we identified in our interviews: administrative, political and social obstacles. Based on this analysis, we will conclude by suggesting concrete steps that the Ukrainian government, civil society and international actors can take toward reintegration.

Background: How Today's Veterans Became Soldiers

Understanding the development of the ongoing conflict in Donbas is essential to comprehending reintegration dynamics. Who went to Donbas to fight, and for what reasons? The dire state of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) in 2014 meant that the initial recruitment was very chaotic. For this reason, volunteer combatants – many of whom were not officially affiliated with the military – played a decisive role in the first months of the conflict, for which they received much recognition. This had two important consequences. First, civilian volunteers and activists remain key actors who enjoy greater trust among soldiers and veterans than the Ukrainian government to this day. Second, given that many of these volunteers were civilians before the conflict began, a wide variety of people joined the armed forces or volunteer battalions. Today, they make up a diverse group of ATO/JFO veterans. This impacts their experience of reintegration and shapes the contemporary societal image of a veteran.

The Dire State of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2014

Since Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, its defense and security sector has been subject to continuous attempts at reform. These efforts focused on converting and shrinking the oversized Soviet structures into more efficient national ones.⁹ After the Orange Revolution in 2004, the Ukrainian government intended to convert its armed forces into a smaller, more professionalized and mobile force.¹⁰ Against a backdrop of political turmoil and lack of funds, the reform effort brought very mixed results. By 2014, downsizing the army had led to a situation in which a large portion of the equipment was outdated and the UAF had effectively lost its combat readiness.¹¹ To make matters worse, the Ukrainian army and security agencies had previously been closely intertwined with their Russian counterparts, which proved extremely problematic in 2014. For instance, around 70 percent of the Ukrainian forces stationed in Crimea deserted and joined the Russian side in March 2014.¹²

9 Oleksiy Melnyk, "Putting Democratic Values at the Centre of International Assistance to Ukraine," PeaceLab Blog, September 14, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://peacelab.blog/2020/09/putting-democratic-values-at-the-centre-of-international-assistance-to-ukraine>.

10 Deborah Sanders, "'The War We Want; The War That We Get': Ukraine's Military Reform and the Conflict in the East," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 30, 1 (2017): 30–49.

11 Valeriy Akimenko, "Ukraine's Toughest Fight: The Challenge of Military Reform," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 22, 2018, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/22/ukraine-s-toughest-fight-challenge-of-military-reform-pub-75609>.

12 Valentin Torba, "Armiya. Voina. Ekzamen," *Den'*, March 9, 2017, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://day.kyiv.ua/ru/article/podrobnosti/armiya-voina-ekzamen>.

Not only was the onset of the conflict in 2014 marked by political and social turmoil – military mobilization also proved very chaotic due to the UAF’s lack of combat readiness. After the illegal annexation of Crimea and as a reaction to the armed seizure of buildings and territories in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions by Russian-backed separatists, the Ukrainian government launched the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in April 2014. This terminology is odd, given that there was little (if any) terrorism involved.¹³ The label was chosen to avoid declaring martial law,¹⁴ thus giving Russia no pretext to launch an invasion,¹⁵ while simultaneously discrediting Russian-backed militants as “terrorists.”¹⁶ Ukrainians were recruited for the regular armed forces in a total of six waves of mobilization, and conscription was reinstated in May 2014.¹⁷ However, many decided to volunteer at the onset of hostilities in the spring of 2014.

The Crucial Role of Volunteers in the ATO

Volunteers played a vital part at the onset of the ATO – both those who joined the armed forces without being conscripted (*dobrovoltsi*) and those who joined volunteer battalions (*dobrobaty*). The exact number of battalions and their associated volunteers is unknown. Some estimate that around 15,000 volunteers fought in approximately 50 battalions.¹⁸ All battalions were in some way associated with either the MoIA or the MoD.¹⁹ Many of the battalions evolved out of political movements established at the time of the Maidan protests and varied greatly in size, degree of internal organization, professionalism, and equipment, as well as in the origin and composition of their members, funding and prevalent political views. Some battalions displayed decidedly nationalist or neo-fascist views, while others included foreign fighters, such as soldiers from Chechnya and Georgia, who participated in the conflict as part of a larger struggle against Russian domination.²⁰ Not all the volunteers had prior combat experience. Many preferred to join these volunteer battalions as opposed to the dysfunctional Ukrainian

13 Nikolai Holmov, “A Farewell to ATO: Ukraine Shifts Command of Forces Serving Around Temporarily Occupied Territories,” The Jamestown Foundation, April 16, 2018, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/a-farewell-to-ato-ukraine-shifts-command-of-forces-serving-around-temporarily-occupied-territories/>.

14 Vera Zimmermann, “What Does Ukraine’s New Military Approach Toward the Donbas Mean?” Atlantic Council, May 15, 2018, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/what-does-ukraine-s-new-military-approach-toward-the-donbas-mean/>.

15 Johann Zajackowski, “Homogenität und Fragmentierung. Ukrainische Freiwilligenbataillone im Wandel,” in: Manfred Sapper and Volker Weichsel, eds., *Schlachtfeld Ukraine Studien Zur Soziologie Des Kriegs*, Osteuropa, Vol. 3–4 (2019), Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag.

16 Gwendolyn Sasse, “Ukraine’s New Military Engagement in the Donbas,” Carnegie Europe, March 3, 2018, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/76246>.

17 BBC News, “Ukraine Reinstates Conscription as Crisis Deepens,” *BBC News Europe*, May 2, 2014, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27247428>.

18 Chris Dunnett, “Ukraine’s ‘Battalion’ Army, Explained,” Hromadske International, September 17, 2014, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://medium.com/@Hromadske/ukraines-shadow-army-b04d7a683493#a5dro017t>.

19 Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, “Geiselnnehmer oder Retter des Staates? Irreguläre Bataillone in der Ukraine,” in: Manfred Sapper and Volker Weichsel, eds., *Schlachtfeld Ukraine Studien Zur Soziologie Des Kriegs*, Osteuropa, Vol. 3–4 (2019), Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag.

20 Heinemann-Grüder, “Geiselnnehmer oder Retter des Staates?”

army, and some had friends in the battalions and found it easier to fight alongside them rather than the UAF.²¹ Both the MoIA and the MoD supplied the battalions with weapons and food, but not to a sufficient level. For this reason, various civil society organizations (CSOs) and oligarchs also provided financial support.²² Coordination between the battalions and the UAF was sometimes difficult due to unclear command structures.²³

Volunteer battalions attracted international attention and concern, mostly out of fear that they would challenge the state monopoly on force, either on their own initiative or in the service of one of their financiers. In 2015, these battalions were integrated into state security structures (e.g., the UAF or the National Guard)²⁴ as stipulated in the Minsk II Agreement,²⁵ except for a few battalions that initially opposed this integration.²⁶ Today, the “Right Sector” is the only battalion that remains autonomous and participates in combat in Donbas.²⁷ Some speculate that this battalion cooperates with the Ukrainian Secret Service (SBU) to conduct sabotage, thus offering the Ukrainian authorities plausible deniability. Several of the volunteer battalions are accused of having committed human rights abuses in the conflict zone.²⁸

Civilian volunteers also played a crucial role in supporting the ATO. The MoD essentially crowdfunded army supplies and equipment, raising 11.7 million USD in only four months in 2014.²⁹ In response, a myriad of CSOs mobilized to collect equipment, clothes, nutritional items, and other essentials.³⁰ Some of these CSOs still exist today. Although contributions have since decreased, civilian volunteers remain the most trusted entity in the country – with the armed forces in second place.³¹ Just as civil society has actively contributed to mobilization in 2014, it has also been actively advocating for veteran rights since as early as 2015.

21 Interview with veteran, male, Donbas battalion, August 20, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

22 Heinemann-Grüder, “Geiselnehmer oder Retter des Staates?”

23 Sanders, “The War We Want; The War That We Get.”

24 Zajaczkowski, “Homogenität und Fragmentierung.”

25 “Full Text of the Minsk Agreement,” *Financial Times*, February 12, 2015, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de>.

26 For instance when the Aidar battalion protested its dissolution, as outlined in Zajaczkowski, “Homogenität und Fragmentierung.”

27 Zajaczkowski, “Homogenität und Fragmentierung.”

28 Amnesty International, “Amnesty International Briefing Ukraine: Abuses and War Crimes by the Aidar Volunteer Battalion in the North Luhansk Region,” September 8, 2014, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/8000/eur500402014en.pdf>; “Looting, Torture, and Big Business: A Look at Volunteer Groups Fighting the Separatists in Ukraine,” *Meduza*, July 1, 2015, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2015/07/01/looting-torture-and-big-business>.

29 Vitaly Shevchenko, “Crowdfunding in Ukraine’s DIY War,” *BBC News Europe*, July 29, 2014, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28459772>.

30 Charles Recknagel and Merhat Sharipzhan, “Army in Need: Volunteers Try to Get Supplies to Ukraine’s Forces,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 6, 2014, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-army-equipment-donations/25413169.html>.

31 The question reads “To which degree do you approve of the work of the following government and nongovernment entities.” International Republican Institute, “Sixth Annual Ukrainian Municipal Survey,” 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/ukraine_feb_2020_poll.pdf.

The Ongoing Conflict Became Static After 2015

In 2015, following the adoption of the Minsk II Agreement, the conflict in Donbas changed shape: while still claiming lives on a regular basis, the frontline has since become increasingly static.³² Combatants faced “long periods of boredom and repetition followed by ferocious attacks,”³³ which has been mentally draining for many and has led to an increase in the number of accidents, imprudent uses of weapons, suicides, and murders.³⁴ For this reason, it makes a difference whether a veteran served between 2014 and 2015 (when very intense fighting occurred in places such as Ilovaysk and Debaltseve, and at Donetsk Airport) or after 2015. In 2018, the Ukrainian government converted the ATO into the “Joint Forces Operation” (JFO),³⁵ a combat operation now formally under the command of the UAF General Staff. The JFO recognizes Russia as an aggressor in the conflict, rather than focusing on Russian-backed separatists or “terrorists.” In the course of this name change, the Ukrainian state also started referring to the so-called “People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk” as “temporarily occupied territories” rather than “non-government-controlled areas.”

With the conflict ongoing, the number of veterans continues to grow. The latest ceasefire was put in place in July 2020. At the time of writing, this ceasefire has been more successful than its predecessors, but prospects of a lasting peace remain slim.³⁶ For this reason, the MoD has built up its reserve forces, which by 2018 numbered a little over 200,000 reservists.³⁷ This operational reserve is made up of soldiers who have combat experience and/or have been discharged from military service³⁸ – thus including some of the roughly 400,000 veterans to date.

The Role of Veterans in Ukrainian Society Changed After 2014

Combatants returning from Donbas have changed the societal image of a “veteran.” The total number of veterans in Ukraine is estimated to be over one million³⁹ and – in addition to those who joined the ATO/JFO, who make up about one-third of the total – includes veterans of the Second World War (WWII), the Soviet-Afghan war, and United

32 International Crisis Group, “Ukraine: The Line,” Briefing no. 81, July 18, 2016, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/ukraine-line>.

33 Sanders, “The War We Want; The War That We Get,” p. 40.

34 Zajackowski, “Homogenität und Fragmentierung.”

35 Adam Coffey, “Ukraine Declares ‘Anti-Terrorist Operation in the Donbas’ Officially Over: What Does That Mean?” Commentary, *RUSI*, May 16, 2018, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://rusi.org/commentary/ukraine-declares-anti-terrorist-operation-donbas-officially-over-what-does-mean>.

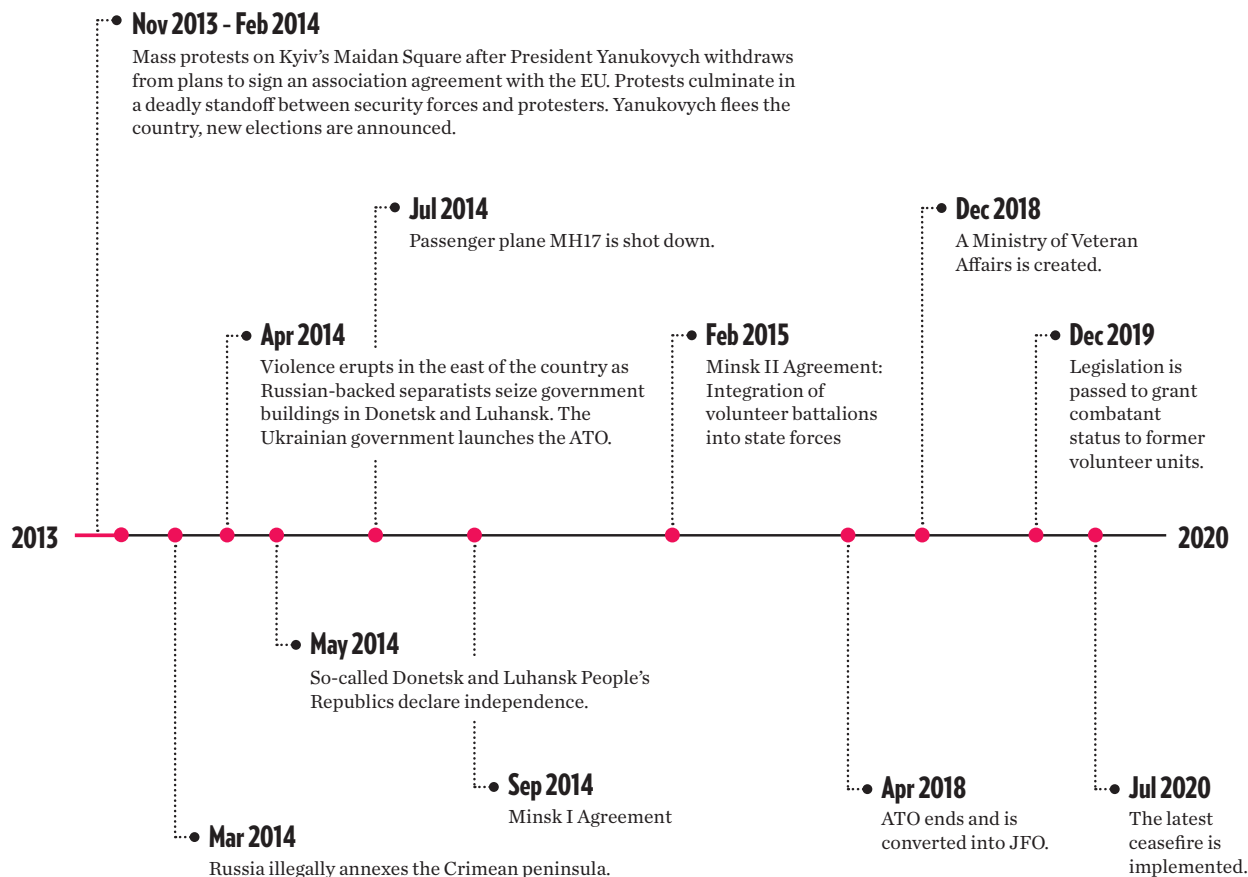
36 Nikolaus von Twickel, “Waffenstillstand ohne Fortschritt,” PeaceLab Blog, September 30, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://peacelab.blog/2020/09/waffenstillstand-ohne-fortschritt>.

37 Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, *White Book 2018: The Armed Forces of Ukraine*, 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, https://www.mil.gov.ua/content/files/whitebook/WB_2018_eng.pdf.

38 Ibid.

39 Legal100, “Shcho Zrobyla Verkhovna Rada Dlia Veteraniv Ta Viiskovykh Za Pershe Pivrichchia 2020 Roku” 2020b, accessed November 26, 2020, https://legal100.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020_analitch-nii--zvit.pdf.

Figure 4: Timeline of Key Events Pertaining to the Violent Conflict in Donbas (2014-2020)



Nations Peace Operations, to which Ukraine has actively contributed in the past.⁴⁰ Societal views of veterans in Ukraine have traditionally been shaped by WWII veterans, meaning veterans are usually imagined as elderly people.⁴¹ In the Soviet Union, WWII veterans received state-sponsored benefits and privileges, such as the right to free transport, free stays in state sanatoria and a telephone landline⁴² – benefits to which veterans are still entitled in Ukraine today. Until 2014, parades took place celebrating the end of WWII, and commemorations were heavily influenced by images of heroism.⁴³

40 "Ukraine's Participation in the UN Peacekeeping Activities," Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the United Nations, 2016, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://ukraineun.org/en/ukraine-and-un/peacekeeping-activities/>.

41 Interview with MoVA official, September 9, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

42 Natalia Danilova, "Veterans' Policy in Russia: A Puzzle of Creation," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, Issue 6/7 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.4000/pipss.873>.

43 Roman Goncharenko, "World War II and the Battle over Collective Memory in Eastern Europe," *Deutsche Welle*, May 9, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/world-war-ii-and-the-battle-over-collective-memory-in-eastern-europe/a-53356626>.

Societal images of Afghan war veterans (Afhantsi) in Soviet and later Ukrainian society are influenced by a predominantly negative attitude toward this war. Many associated the war with Soviet imperialism and considered it unnecessary. Since 2014, critics of the Afghan war have connected it – and by extension its veterans – with Russian expansionism. Afghan war veterans maintained close ties to their Russian comrades and regularly visited Russia for commemorations before 2014.⁴⁴ The conflict in Donbas rendered these relations much more complicated. Some Afghan war veterans even ended up fighting against their former comrades, as some Afghan veterans participated in Euromaidan and subsequently joined the UAF, while others ended up fighting alongside Russian-backed separatists.⁴⁵

In this way, veterans played an important role in Ukrainian society prior to 2014, primarily as (Soviet) symbols of heroism. This image has shifted since 2014, as “veterans” are no longer simply an elderly social group, but young men and women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds with equally diverse reasons for fighting in Donbas.

44 Iryna Sklokina, “Veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War and the Ukrainian Nation-Building Project: From Pere-stroika to the Maidan and the War in the Donbas,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, Double special issue: “Back from Afghanistan: The Experiences of Soviet Afghan War Veterans,” and “Martyrdom & Memory in Post-Socialist Space” (2015).

45 Amie Ferris-Rotman, “The Return of the ‘Afgantsy,’” *POLITICO Magazine*, September 27, 2015, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/ukraine-war-soviet-fighters-213142>.

Current Reintegration Practices and Shortcomings

Ex-combatants returning from Donbas have not only changed the societal view of veterans, they have also brought about significant changes in legislation and practice regarding the provision of social services for veterans. This is largely the result of a strong civil lobbying effort that ultimately led to the creation of the Ukrainian Ministry of Veterans Affairs (MoVA) in 2018.

However, despite improvements to veterans' access to information concerning their rights and benefits, current reintegration measures remain insufficient. Support for veterans is organized as a system of benefits for which veterans must apply individually. Access to this system remains challenging, and the benefits are not set up to address reintegration needs adequately. Mental and physical health constitute two particularly underserved areas. Across the board, veterans, civil society organizations, ministry officials, and international actors have criticized this benefit-centered approach to reintegration as outdated and inefficient, and have proposed new reforms. At the same time, these actors are involved in the reintegration process at different levels and do not always cooperate with one another.

Deep structural challenges in Ukraine are shaping the politics of reintegration. Russia continues to pursue efforts to debilitate the Ukrainian government. Simultaneously, the country is struggling to enact internal reforms in a difficult economic climate against the backdrop of increasing societal and political polarization. Politics in Ukraine is an uphill battle – not only with reference to veterans.

Structural Challenges Undermine Reintegration

Ukrainian politics are marked by Russian efforts to destabilize and undermine the Ukrainian state.⁴⁶ First and foremost, this includes the ongoing conflict in Donbas. However, Russia also uses other means of destabilization, such as spreading false or misleading information, including about ex-combatants. This influences the Ukrainian state's overall capacity, as resources have to be diverted to counter these destabilization efforts.

Simultaneously, and despite these efforts, Ukraine has been pursuing significant reforms over the past six years, battling old power structures and corruption. While Russian efforts to destabilize the country fuel resistance to these reforms, the

⁴⁶ Mathieu Boulège and Orysia Lutsevych, “Resilient Ukraine Safeguarding Society from Russian Aggression,” Ukraine Forum Chatham House, October 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/virtual-roundtable-resilient-ukraine-safeguarding-society-russian>.

persistence of established Ukrainian elites who continue to hamper reform is an internal problem in its own right. As in every country, change is slow and difficult.⁴⁷ Ongoing reform efforts impact many of the government institutions responsible for veteran reintegration. Political hot potatoes such as land reform and decentralization – the latter contributing to some communication problems between Kyiv and the regions – affect government capacities and the political interests that underpin veteran reintegration.

The socio-economic situation in Ukraine exacerbates veterans' difficulties. A tough economic climate, rendered even more onerous by the COVID-19 pandemic, decreases their chances of finding a job.⁴⁸ In addition, generally weak social services and healthcare provision negatively impact veterans' ability to receive these services.⁴⁹ Social stigma associated with mental health, particularly directed at men, increases veterans' reluctance to seek help.⁵⁰ Significant changes and reforms since 2014 have affected society as a whole: a strong civil society movement has emerged, but it remains small, with only 10 percent of the population regularly engaged.⁵¹ Simultaneously, Ukrainians have different opinions about the course the country has taken following the events of Euromaidan and its aftermath, which increases political polarization.⁵² This constitutes the political and social backdrop of all reintegration efforts in Ukraine.

State Actors Are Unequally Involved in Reintegration

The MoVA was created to signal that veterans' well-being was a political priority,⁵³ but this has not been reflected in its structures or budget. Under pressure from a civil society campaign, the Ukrainian government under Prime Minister Volodymyr Hroisman created the MoVA in 2018.⁵⁴ It was merged with the Ministry for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories in Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk's cabinet in 2019, only to be re-established as an independent ministry under Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal in 2020. For this reason, the ministry is still in its early stages, and its structures remain in flux. It has limited funding with which to establish itself: Ukraine's planned budget for 2021 allocates roughly 11.32 million euros (374 million

47 Steven Pifer, "Ukraine's Zelenskiy Ran on a Reform Platform – Is He Delivering?" Brookings, July 22, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/07/22/ukraines-zelenskiy-ran-on-a-reform-platform-is-he-delivering/>.

48 "UN Study Documents Devastating Impact of COVID-19 in Ukraine," UNDP, September 28, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/UN_study_documents_impact_COVID19_in_Ukraine.html.

49 UNICEF Ukraine, "Social Policy Programme," September 17, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/social-policy-programme>.

50 Flavie Bertouille, "What's Next for Veterans in Ukraine?" Policy Brief, International Alert, March 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Ukraine_Whatsnextforveterans_%20EN_2019.pdf.

51 Boulège and Lutsevych, "Resilient Ukraine Safeguarding Society from Russian Aggression."

52 Anne Applebaum, Peter Pomertantsev, Sophia Gaston, et al., *From 'Memory Wars' to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine*, Arena-LSE, July 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/Arena-LSE-From-Memory-Wars-to-a-Common-Future-Overcoming-Polarisation-in-Ukraine.pdf>.

53 Interview with former senior MoH official, September 3, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

54 Zajaczkowski, "Homogenität und Fragmentierung."

hryvnia) to the MoVA, slightly less than the 2020 budget.⁵⁵ The ministry has a limited mandate, and is therefore substantially smaller and has considerably fewer resources than other ministries involved in veteran affairs. Budget comparisons make the relations between these ministries evident: the MoD and the MoIA have budgets of approximately 3.4 billion euros (117.5 billion hryvnia) and 2.9 billion euros (98.3 billion hryvnia) respectively. In 2021, the Ministry of Health (MoH) is set to receive around 4.5 billion euros (155.2 billion hryvnia), and the Ministry of Social Policy (MSP) has been allocated 9.3 billion euros (319.4 billion hryvnia).⁵⁶

Besides representing a show of political support, creating the MoVA was also an attempt to simplify the reintegration process by designating a responsible entity at the state level.⁵⁷ Although this led to a certain degree of streamlining concerning the organization of veteran issues, the process remains complex. Since veteran affairs are a cross-cutting issue, a variety of state actors have been involved in designing and implementing reintegration measures. To date, there are 10 different institutions involved in various aspects of veteran reintegration,⁵⁸ and competencies remain scattered. To further complicate the matter, the MoD and the MoIA each have their “own” set of Donbas veterans. The MoD is responsible for veterans who are military professionals (as opposed to volunteers or recruits who only participated in the ATO/JFO). These professionals usually have better access to benefits and programs.⁵⁹ The MoIA is responsible for members of the National Police and the Ukrainian National Guard who participated in combat operations, including former volunteer battalions.⁶⁰

The lack of harmonized standards at the local level makes reintegration inconsistent and subject to regional differences. In many ways, local authorities are the “first responders” when it comes to veteran reintegration. Usually, when a soldier demobilizes, the responsible unit –either in the MoD or the MoIA – gives them their documents, and the veteran goes home. It is then up to local authorities to follow up. Local MSP branches are in charge of handing out veteran benefits and thus play a particularly crucial role, as they are also tasked with communicating with veterans about their right to benefits. Whether and to what extent this obligation is fulfilled depends on the individual local offices. After this initial consultation, there is no follow-up mechanism.⁶¹ The ongoing decentralization reform that strengthens local authorities also influences this process, because state actors such as the MoVA are less aware of how their policies are implemented and whether these actions are adequate in

55 Legal100, “Derzhavnyi Biudzheth Na 2021 Rik Dlia Veteraniv,” 2020c, accessed November 26, 2020, https://legal100.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/info_derzhbyudzheth_2021.png. Exchange rate retrieved from Oanda Currency Converter on December 14, 2020.

56 Yaroslav Vynokurov, “Byudzheth 2021. Kakie Izmeneniya Kabmin Zaplaniroval Dlya Ukrainsev Na Sleduyushchiy God,” *Ekonomicheskaja Pravda*, September 15, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.epravda.com.ua/rus/publications/2020/09/15/665123/>; and “Dodatok (Rozpodil vydatkiv ta nadannya kredytiv za prohramnoyu klasyfikatsiieiu na 2019-2021 roky) 14.09.2020,” accessed November 26, 2020 at Verkhovna Rada, “Proekt Zakonu pro Derzhavnyi Biudzheth Ukrainy Na 2021 Rik,” September 14, 2020, https://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=69938. All exchange rates retrieved from Oanda Currency Converter on December 14, 2020.

57 Interview with civil society representative, August 20, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

58 Interview with MoVA official, September 9, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

59 Interview with international organization, September 21, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

60 Interview with MoIA official, October 16, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

61 Interview with civil society representative, August 25, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

the different regional contexts. The MoVA is currently establishing branches in various regions to serve as intermediaries between veterans and the MSP. However, it is often civil society organizations and veteran associations that engage most with veterans and serve as advocates for their rights.

Finally, the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, is an important actor in veteran affairs in its capacities as legislator and watchdog. It has repeatedly changed and amended the 1993 Law on Veterans. Some members of parliament (MPs) are themselves veterans and have advocated for veteran rights jointly with other MPs – for instance, by creating a Special Commission on the Status of Veterans.⁶² The former parliamentary committee on veterans was merged with the committee on social policy to form the Social Policy and Veteran Affairs committee at the beginning of the new legislative period in 2019. Various MPs criticized this decision as deprioritizing veteran affairs, similarly to the temporary merger of the MoVA and the Ministry for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories.⁶³

Civil Society and Community-Based Actors Fill the Gaps

In addition to the structures and institutions provided by the state, a myriad of civil society organizations (CSOs) advocate for veterans, including ATO/JFO unions. Different types of CSOs are unevenly spread throughout Ukraine, with clusters in Kyiv and regional centers. Given the low barriers for NGO registration, many civil society and veteran organizations exist on paper but are inactive.⁶⁴ Particularly in the case of veteran unions, outsiders cannot always discern which associations are trustworthy. Political orientation, especially far-right sentiments, further complicates this situation. Because of these complications, some international donors are at times reluctant to provide financial support to veteran associations or projects related to veterans in general. Still, some associations have successfully organized funds from international donors, such as an ATO veteran union in Southeast Ukraine that received funds from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to create a community space for veterans and IDPs. Some CSOs and veteran associations apply for state grants for concrete projects, while others operate on a purely volunteer basis. Within this landscape, there are rare cases of shell organizations designed to launder money.⁶⁵

Veteran associations can be very important providers of peer-to-peer support for ex-combatants and often assist veterans in accessing their rights and benefits. In contrast to other CSOs, these organizations consist only of veterans. However, not all veterans want to join veteran associations,⁶⁶ and in some rural areas, such associations do not exist. There are a few promising initiatives underway to create a single ATO veteran union to cover several villages in certain areas.⁶⁷ ATO unions often serve as mediators and lobbyists for veterans dealing with local authorities and act as their

⁶² Interview with member of parliament, October 12, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Interview with international organization, September 28, 2020, Berlin/Washington, DC/Kyiv.

⁶⁵ Interview with civilian volunteer for ATO veterans, October 5, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

⁶⁶ Interview with veteran, male, Tornado battalion, September 11, 2020, Berlin/Kostiantynivka.

⁶⁷ Interview with civil society representative, October 17, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

primary information source.⁶⁸ However, political interest groups sometimes exploit veteran associations. Some of these associations are driven or influenced by far-right actors. Traditional gender roles and expectations in society, as well as in female veterans' immediate surroundings, can place significant time and practical constraints on women's opportunities to join ATO unions. Thus, women often have greater difficulty accessing these unions, since they are expected to take care of their households and there may be limited childcare options on union premises.⁶⁹

Some veteran associations have successfully influenced state policy concerning veterans. Twenty-two veteran association representatives – one from each region – consult with the MoVA in the form of a “Veteran Council.” This council was initiated in 2019 by then-minister Oksana Koliada as a way to engage veteran representatives and heads of veteran associations from all parts of the country.⁷⁰ Two other councils consult with the MoVA: a council of mothers and families of the deceased, and a “Public Council” with members elected by the public. While in theory any Ukrainian can vote for the members of this council, in practice members are elected by interested parties. These councils do not formally cooperate with one another, and their influence varies. The MoVA has been criticized for allowing known members of far-right organizations to join the Public Council.⁷¹



The Veteran Hub

The Veteran Hub, launched in 2018, is a space for veterans in Kyiv. Its principle idea is simple: the hub serves as a front office, directing veterans who make a request or have a specific need to one of 10 civil society organizations on the hub's premises or to other partner organizations in Kyiv. The founders had previously worked as a small organization and came up with idea of the Veteran Hub after they had experienced trouble staying afloat financially and saw a lot of duplication of work. The hub was conceived as a one-stop shop which would streamline efforts and ease the financial burden on organizations.⁷² Today, the Veteran Hub is supported by the US State Department via the US-based international development organization IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board), among other sponsors. The project is currently expanding, increasing the number of personnel in its original Kyiv office and also opening new branches in several Ukrainian cities, including Odesa and Dnipro. The hub also recently launched a “mobile office” – a Veteran Hub car that can be called

68 Focus group results.

69 Interview with international organization, September 18, 2020, Berlin/Kramatorsk.

70 Interview with former senior MoVA official, October 13, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

71 “Ukraine's Ministry of Veterans Affairs Embraced the Far Right – With Consequences to the U.S.,” *Bellingcat*, November 11, 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/11/11/ukraines-ministry-of-veterans-affairs-embraced-the-far-right-with-consequences-to-the-u-s/>.

72 Interview with civil society representative, August 25, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

to the regions surrounding Kyiv to assist veterans who are less mobile or are unable to access services due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷³ Actors across the board consider the general principle of such “veteran spaces” – one-stop shops where veterans can access different services and receive peer-to-peer support – a promising idea. Some of these spaces are designed to include IDPs as well.⁷⁴

In contrast to veteran associations, regular CSOs are usually made up of both veterans and civilian volunteers. Many of these civilians actively supported the war effort, and some have been pushing for veteran rights since the first waves of demobilization in 2015. These organizations often serve as a gateway for international actors. Foreign stakeholders are more open to financing CSOs than veteran unions because there is less uncertainty about their political leanings. However, funding is not always easy to come by, and grant cycles are often short. Given the multitude of CSOs, work is often duplicated. Since benefit and support structures are quite fragmented, the most successful models seem to be so-called “veteran spaces,” such as the Veteran Hub in Kyiv, which are essentially one-stop shops where veterans can come for consultations and activities.

Qualifying for and Receiving Benefits Is a Challenge

In Ukraine, the most consolidated reintegration measures are a range of Soviet-era benefits to which officially registered veterans are entitled. The 1993 law “On the Status of War Veterans: Guarantees of Their Social Protection” designates close to 50 benefits, including a monthly pension as well as an annual payment, free transportation, several medical benefits (e.g., access to medication), free access to state sanatoria, housing benefits, additional annual leave, and free tuition for veterans and their children, as well as other targeted educational support.⁷⁵ This law is under constant scrutiny and has been amended numerous times since 2015, when the number of veterans in Ukraine increased sharply.

To be eligible for these benefits and services, veterans must receive *uchasnyk boyovykh diy* (UBD), or “participant in combat activity” status. For some veterans, the administrative hurdles they must overcome in order to receive this status can be very difficult to manage. As a consequence, the number of veteran statuses awarded does not necessarily match the number of people who fought in Donbas, and there is no national registry of all ATO/JFO veterans in Ukraine to date. Veterans receive UBD status from the authority to which they reported during their active service, i.e., the MoD or the

73 “Veteran Hub Zapustyly Mobilnyi Ofis,” *BezBroni*, October 6, 2020, accessed December 14, 2020, https://bez-broni.net/news/veteran-hub-zapustili-mobilnii-ofis?fbclid=IwAR20psW6z99wi6wv76DmrHP3CBYNYGbK-1gFBrOPduHP1BGPEWhbbMd-7_WO.

74 Interview with former senior MoVA official, October 13, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

75 Verkhovna Rada, “Pro Status Veteraniv Viyny, Harantiyi Yikh Socialnoho Zakhystu,” accessed November 26, 2020, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3551-12/print1453801044135460#Text>.

MoIA. However, veterans who were volunteers did not register with either authority and consequently did not automatically receive their paperwork after demobilization, unless they joined a formal structure (UAF, the National Guard, or a branch of the police) after the battalions were integrated into state security structures. In 2019, the Verkhovna Rada passed a bill to address this, attempting to ease the registration process for former battalion members. While veterans welcomed this measure, some volunteers still do not have UBD status. One veteran described the administrative difficulties he experienced as follows:

“The problem is Soviet-style bureaucracy. When I demobilized, I did not have my UBD card in my hands – I had lost it. [...] When I received my disability status from the medical commission, I wanted to get my disability certificate from social services. They said, we cannot give it to you without your UBD. So I went to the military commissariat and I told them I needed my UBD. They said, we cannot give it to you – you have disability status now.”

– Veteran, male, Kostiantynivka⁷⁶

One source of discontent for many veterans is that while some struggle to receive UBD status, others simply buy or request it despite not having participated in combat (e.g., if they worked in the MoD offices in the Donetsk or Luhansk regions).⁷⁷ There is also a gender dimension to this problem: because women were not legally allowed to participate in combat activity until 2018,⁷⁸ many women have a harder time receiving their UBD status.⁷⁹ Those female veterans who do receive a UBD certificate are often officially listed as having served as seamstresses, cooks or in other supporting roles, when in fact they were snipers or frontline troops. While they can still receive benefits, this impedes their eligibility for treatment of physical injuries sustained in combat.⁸⁰

Even when veterans receive their UBD status, access to benefits can still be challenging. Often, their peers are their primary source of information – which means that isolated individuals in rural areas have a harder time learning about their benefits and how to access them. Some benefits, such as the monthly stipend and free transport,

76 Interview with veteran, male, Tornado battalion, September 11, 2020, Berlin/Kostiantynivka.

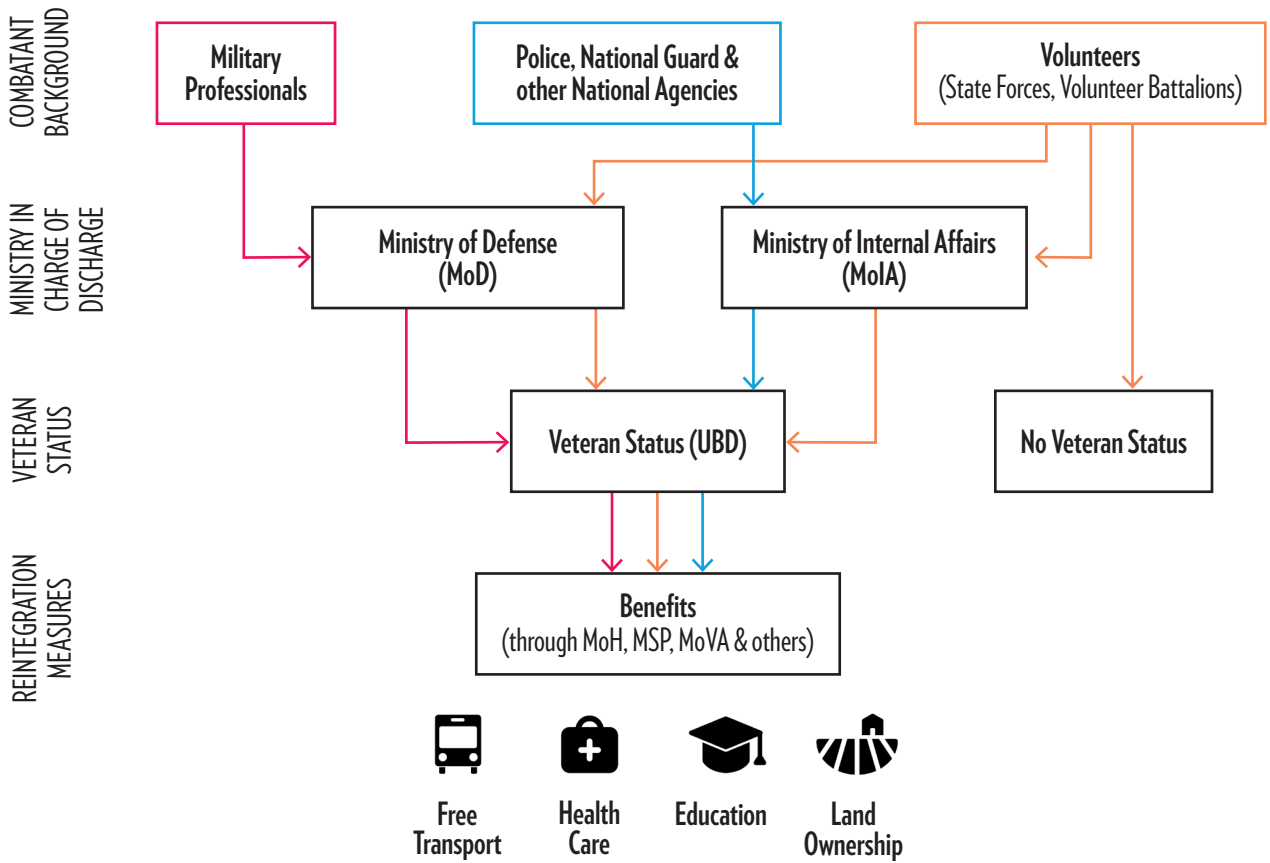
77 Interview with former senior MoH official, September 3, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

78 Hanna Hrytsenko, “Women in Ukraine’s Military: An Opportunity for Change,” PeaceLab Blog, April 28, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://peacelab.blog/2020/04/women-in-ukraines-military-an-opportunity-for-change>.

79 Tamara Martsenyuk et al., “Invisible Battalion 2.0: Women Veterans Returning to Peaceful Life,” UN Women, November 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2019/11/invisible%20battalion%2020eng.pdf?la=en&vs=3417>.

80 Interview with veteran, female, representative of the Women Veteran Movement, September 4, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

Figure 5: Veterans' Various Pathways to Benefits



are rather easy to receive, whereas others pose a more difficult problem.⁸¹ For instance, employment remains a crucial – and difficult – area of reintegration. Veterans are often offered unskilled labor positions for which they are overqualified, and some jobs are especially unsuitable for women. In this environment, retraining efforts are all the more important. However, training programs are not easily accessible: even if tuition is free, veterans are not often given preferential treatment when applying for loans that would allow them to study as opposed to work.⁸²

81 International Organization for Migration, “Life after Conflict: Survey on the Sociodemographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Veterans of the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine and Their Families,” January 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, http://ukraine.iom.int/sites/default/files/veterans_reintegration_survey_2020_eng.pdf.

82 Interview with member of parliament, October 12, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

Physical and Mental Health Needs Remain Underserved

Veterans face a complex system when it comes to healthcare provisions. Some hospitals specialize in veteran care but fail to sufficiently meet their needs.⁸³ Many argue that, instead of creating these specialized institutions, it would be more sensible to strengthen the entire system and provide a special “veteran package” that could be accessed in local facilities. While this might be a more sustainable solution, such a change would also be difficult and costly to implement in a context where healthcare is a problem facing the entire Ukrainian public, not just veterans. However, veterans are disproportionately affected by these issues, as the overwhelming majority experiences some physical difficulties as a result of their service. Women often face very specific health challenges, e.g., back pain and reproductive problems. Veterans with disabilities are classified into three different groups (I, II, or III),⁸⁴ which translate into different monetary benefits. This classification system is widely criticized as unfair and corrupt. Additionally, some veterans report having to appear before a medical commission to provide proof of their disability once a year, which is physically draining and makes little sense for veterans with permanent disabilities, such as amputations.

With regard to psychological trauma, there is no uniform policy on providing psychosocial support.⁸⁵ Mental healthcare provision is currently organized via stays in state-run sanatoria, typically for a period of two weeks. However, these efforts do not provide the necessary support. State practitioners are ill-paid and are not trained to treat war-related mental health conditions.⁸⁶ While some volunteers provide such services, they do not operate in all regions and are often insufficiently qualified, as it is fairly easy to get certified online.⁸⁷ Recent efforts to improve mental health services for veterans have focused primarily on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While commendable, this can lead to over-diagnosing PTSD, while the real causes may lie elsewhere and thus remain untreated.⁸⁸ The social stigma surrounding mental health often leads to situations in which veterans recommend that others seek psychological aid but do not do so themselves.⁸⁹

Gender plays an important role in this dynamic: women are expected to express and address their feelings about the war, whereas men feel they have to stay strong and refrain from showing any emotion.⁹⁰ If psychological challenges remain untreated,

83 Interview with member of parliament, October 12, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

84 There are three categories of “disability” status in Ukraine: Group I means the person is unable to do any work and requires constant care; Group II means unable to do any work and does not require constant care; Group III means unable to do normal work. Information retrieved from “Social Security Programs Throughout the World: Europe – Ukraine,” Social Security Office of Retirement and Disability Policy, 2016, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/progdesc/ssptw/2016-2017/europe/ukraine.html>.

85 Interview with MoVA official, September 9, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

86 Interview with mental health consultant working with veterans, August 25, 2020, Berlin/Dnipro.

87 The World Bank, *Socio-Economic Impacts of Internal Displacement and Veteran Return: Summary Report*, May 2017, accessed November 26, 2020, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/571011497962214803/pdf/116489-REVISED-Updated-Report-Socioeconomic-Impacts-Internal-Displacement-Veteran-Ret.pdf>.

88 Interview with founder of mental health initiative, male, September 4, 2020, Berlin/San Sebastian.

89 IOM, “Life after Conflict.”

90 Bertouille, “What’s next for Veterans in Ukraine?”

veterans may resort to alcoholism or aggression.⁹¹ Veterans' families are most impacted by these issues but are insufficiently supported. For instance, there are currently no programs in place to combat domestic violence.⁹² The fact that domestic violence is generally prevalent and stigmatized in Ukrainian society exacerbates this problem.⁹³ Peer-to-peer support seems to help break this stigma: veterans are more inclined to seek psychosocial support from other veterans who are psychologists, and peers who seek psychological support have a positive influence on other veterans.

A Benefit-Centered System Does Not Encourage Reintegration

Veterans and reintegration actors across the board criticize the benefit-centered system enacted by the 1993 law as ineffective. Many are convinced that it must be reformed and changed into a service-oriented system. “Give us the fishing rod, not the fish” has become a sort of slogan among veterans, civil society representatives, veteran associations, and the MoVA. One MoVA official made it clear that the state does not have the capacity to provide benefits to every veteran for the rest of their life.⁹⁴ Civil society actors argue that the current law on veterans does not create opportunities for reintegration.⁹⁵ For instance, the provision that veterans should be “first in line” to receive land does not provide any sustainable tools for reintegration. In practice, it is very difficult to obtain land, and many veterans end up giving up their land to the highest bidder for cash.⁹⁶ Without getting into the intricacies of Ukrainian land reform, it is also clear that this stipulation invites corruption: interested businessmen can obtain adjacent plots of land from different veterans for little money, thus assembling a larger, more valuable plot of land.



Combatting Social Stigma

Social stigma affects the reintegration of political minorities, such as LGBT+ veterans who face severe discrimination both within and outside the veteran community. In 2018, ex-combatant Viktor Pylypenko founded a Facebook group for LGBT+ veterans.⁹⁷ To raise awareness, organizers created events such as the photo exhibition “We Were Here” by Anton Shebetko, depicting LGBT+ ATO

91 Bertouille, “What’s next for Veterans in Ukraine?”

92 Interview with local MoVA official, September 14, 2020, Berlin/Mykolaiv.

93 Kateryna Busol, “Domestic Violence in Ukraine: Lessons from COVID-19,” Chatham House, July 23, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/07/domestic-violence-ukraine-lessons-covid-19>.

94 Interview with MoVA official, September 9, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

95 Interview with civil society representative, August 20, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

96 Focus group report.

97 Natalie Vikhrov, “Ukraine’s LGBT+ War Veterans Boost Battle for Equality,” Reuters, February 17, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-lgbt-rights-feature-trfn-idUSKB-N20BOP9>.

participants. At the 2019 Kyiv pride parade, active LGBT+ veterans organized a military column for the first time. Some veterans actively support the LGBT+ community, while others openly attack gay veterans both verbally and physically, questioning whether they participated in heavy combat. Homophobic hate crimes often go unpunished in Ukraine.⁹⁸ Other politically underrepresented groups, such as women, have also actively campaigned for their rights. A successful example of breaking social stigma against female soldiers and veterans is the “Invisible Battalion” information and advocacy campaign led by Maria Berlinska and her colleagues in the Ukrainian Women Veteran Movement. Facing severe institutional and societal obstacles, they succeeded in making previously inaccessible military combat positions open to women, and they are a strong voice in the veteran community.⁹⁹ However, women’s reintegration needs differ from that of men, and women still face higher hurdles to reintegration,¹⁰⁰ from more severe prejudice on the part of the general public to significant obstacles in receiving benefits and services.¹⁰¹ Other religious or ethnic minorities may also have dedicated veteran unions, but these are not well known within the veteran community.

Many civil society actors advocate for a more individualized veteran support system, since not every veteran needs each benefit or service at all times. For instance, young veterans have a greater need for educational and training opportunities or parenting classes than their older peers, who may require advanced treatment for physical conditions. In addition, while some veterans may want to jump right back into civilian life, others may prefer to take some time to recuperate. For these reasons, a new draft law is currently under review in the Verkhovna Rada. It proposes updates to the 1993 law on veterans, with provisions emphasizing the transition from military to civilian life, clarifying veterans’ status and enabling government support for veterans’ businesses.¹⁰² Another important initiative is also underway: a planned e-registry for veterans, jointly implemented by the MoVA and IREX.¹⁰³ This will be a significant step forward in informing veterans about their rights and benefits, and also in providing data to the ministry.

Reintegration is a complex, individual process that goes beyond merely providing benefits. It is a joint task for veterans, civil society, communities, and governments. According to our analysis, there are currently major obstacles to reintegration on administrative, political and social levels.

98 Natalie Vikhrov, “Ukraine’s LGBT+ war veterans boost battle for equality.”

99 Interview with civil society representative, August 21, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

100 Interview with international organization, September 28, 2020, Berlin/Washington, DC/Kyiv.

101 Tamara Martsenyuk et al., “Invisible Battalion 2.0: Women Veterans Returning to Peaceful Life.”

102 See Verkhovna Rada, “Proekt Zakonu 29.04.2020,” in “Proekt Zakonu pro Status Veteraniv Ta Chleniv Simey Zahyblykh (Pomerlykh) Zakhysnykiv Ukrainy Ta Veteraniv,” 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, https://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=68710.

103 See “Ukraine Veteran Reintegration,” IREX, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.irex.org/project/ukraine-veteran-reintegration>.

Obstacles to Reintegration: Lack of Administrative Reach, Political Polarization and Societal Divisions

With the help of (focus-group) interviews, we identified three major obstacles – administrative, political and social – to veteran reintegration. Although we divide this chapter into three parts, the three barriers are related and often mutually reinforce one another. Many of these issues reflect general difficulties in Ukraine that have negative consequences for reintegration. Tackling each of these obstacles will require a different timeline: social cohesion is a long-term challenge, as is the effort to find a place in society for all people affected by war. However, a political discussion about Donbas’ future in Ukraine needs to take place as soon as possible. Similarly, the administrative reintegration program cannot last forever: while providing services for all Ukrainian veterans is a permanent task, as is each veteran’s individual process of re-establishing a life after the conflict, the state reintegration effort makes the most sense as a well-defined program with clear deliverables and an agreed end date once these goals are achieved. This will require all the relevant actors to make a concerted effort.

1 **Administrative Challenges: State Actors Demonstrate Inadequate Cooperation and Insufficient Reach**

One major obstacle to reintegration is the lack of a coherent policy on veteran reintegration at the ministerial level. State actors generally support veteran reintegration. However, structural challenges, such as ongoing institutional reforms and ministries’ general tendency to work in silos, impede reintegration efforts. There is also a lack of institutional capacity: the MoVA does not have the political buy-in, funding or staff required to tackle the task at hand. Consequently, it also lacks authority vis-à-vis the local and regional administrations that provide veteran benefits. The MoVA’s position – caught between two very powerful ministries, the MoD and the MoIA – exacerbates these institutional challenges. Finally, all ministerial actors are well aware that veteran affairs are a complex, politically sensitive issue that will not easily generate (political) gain. Any serious reintegration effort is necessarily challenging.

The MoVA's Mandate and Its Capacity Do Not Align

The MoVA's mandate and capacities are inconsistent: despite its mission to coordinate veteran policy, a lack of political support means its funding and institutional capacity are insufficient to take charge of the reintegration process.¹⁰⁴ This limited political support is reflected in the fact that the MoVA's organizational structure and senior management were changed three times in less than two years. This makes it difficult for staff to employ long-term, strategic thinking¹⁰⁵ and complicates interactions with outside advisers.¹⁰⁶ These frequent changes also undermine the MoVA's standing vis-à-vis other ministries, which is already weakened by the fact that it is relatively new.¹⁰⁷ The ministry remains underfunded, which in turn leads to a dearth of personnel. As a result, the MoVA lacks expertise and is unable to hire the experts and practitioners required to generate it.¹⁰⁸ This specialized knowledge is particularly important with regard to the MoVA's physical and analytical capacity to collect and analyze data to bridge current information gaps, which will become especially important once the planned e-registry is implemented.

The MoVA Lacks Administrative Reach

The MoVA does not have the necessary administrative reach in the various regions to ensure the implementation of a coherent veteran policy. While the ministry can try to influence local authorities, it does not have any formal authority over them.¹⁰⁹ Cooperation therefore depends on each regional and local administration's capacity and will, and these vary across the country. The MoVA recently opened offices in different regions to serve as mediators between veterans and local authorities.¹¹⁰ While this is a significant and promising step, these offices are understaffed, and the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down hiring processes.¹¹¹ Cooperation with local actors, such as the regional MSP departments that allocate benefits to veterans, depends on chance and individual personalities. This can work if the MoVA representatives are in the same offices as the local MSP officials. In other regions where this is not the case, these departments are sometimes unaware that the MoVA even exists.¹¹²

104 Lauren Van Metre and John Boerstler, "The Trip from Donbas: Ukraine's Pressing Need to Defend Its Veterans," Atlantic Council, September 21, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/ukraines-veterans/>.

105 Interview with MoVA official, September 9, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

106 Interview with international organization, September 28, 2020, Berlin/Washington, DC/Kyiv.

107 Interview with senior MoVA official, September 15, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

108 Interview with MoVA official, September 9, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

109 Interview with senior MoVA official, September 15, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

110 For further reading, see the CSO Legal100's recommendations for these local offices listed in the following comprehensive report: "Metodychnyi Posibnyk. Rekomendatsii Dlia Pratsivnykiv Terytorialnykh Orhaniv Ministerstva u Spravakh Veteraniv Ukrainy," Legal100, 2020a, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://legal100.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/rekomendatsii---dlya-terorganiv-minveteraniv.pdf>.

111 Interview with local MoVA official, September 14, 2020, Berlin/Mykolaiv

112 Interview with member of parliament, October 12, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

“The MoVA may have representatives, but it has no representation.”

– Former Senior MoVA Official¹¹³

This landscape can be confusing for veterans, who sometimes end up contacting the MoVA in Kyiv directly because they do not know that local offices exist. The implementation of veteran policy by local and regional administrations does not necessarily correspond to the decisions made in Kyiv – but this is not always clear to veterans. Some of the veterans and civil society actors we interviewed associated weak service provision with a negative political attitude toward veterans.¹¹⁴ There is no empirical evidence suggesting that local administrations systematically underserve veterans for political reasons. Even if individual MSP caseworkers may be prejudiced against veterans, the overwhelmingly prevalent opinion is that these personal views do not result in deliberate disservice to veterans. Rather, the considerable regional and local variance in service provision is due to a lack of administrative capacity. However, cooperation between different administrative bodies can be complicated by political differences. As one MoVA official put it when referring to the government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk, cooperation becomes difficult when local administrations think “veterans want to kill every person who speaks Russian.”¹¹⁵ Veteran associations may also refuse to cooperate with certain political parties, as in the example of a union of local veteran associations in southern Ukraine that refuses to engage with the city council or the mayor’s office because the local mayor is well known for his pro-Russian views.

Given that the MoVA was created as the result of a strong civil society campaign, it traditionally enjoys good relations with civil society actors, although their respective roles remain ill-defined. On the one hand, ties between veteran associations or other civil society actors and the MoVA are strong – for instance, through the various advisory councils. Ministries are well aware that civil society cooperation is a necessity, since successfully implementing any policy requires buy-in from the veteran community. On the other hand, there are many instances in which the MoVA could put civil society expertise to better use. Both within and outside the ministry, the prevailing opinion is that the MoVA’s role should be to formulate, finance and coordinate policies, while civil society actors with the necessary expertise and contacts should implement them.¹¹⁶ This is not yet the case, mainly because the ministry does not have sufficient funds to allocate – but such a system could be beneficial for both sides, if an appropriate screening process for CSOs and ATO veteran unions were put in place. However, political differences between the senior leadership and veterans can present obstacles to cooperation, such as when some members of the Veteran Council feel that President Zelensky’s administration does not listen to them.¹¹⁷

113 Interview with former senior MoVA official, October 13, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

114 Several interviewees stated this, e.g.: interview with civil society representative, August 20, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv; interview with veteran, male, Donbas battalion, August 20, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv; interview with veteran, male, state forces, September 5, 2020, Berlin/Irpin.

115 Interview with MoVA official, September 9, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

116 E.g., interview with civil society representative, August 25, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv; interview with MoVA official, September 9, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv; interview with former senior MoH official, September 3, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

117 Interview with veteran union representative, September 8, 2020, Berlin/Melitopol.

Inter-Ministerial Relations Impede Reintegration Efforts

By creating the MoVA in 2018, the Ukrainian government made one ministry responsible for veteran affairs. While this clear designation of competencies and responsibilities is important, it gives all the other actors previously involved in reintegration an excuse to evade their role in the process. Inter-ministerial cooperation is always a challenge, but it is especially crucial in this case, as veteran affairs are cross-cutting issues. Unfortunately, political buy-in for cooperation with the MoVA has been and remains low. The MoVA does not have the standing to demand or incentivize cooperation from other ministries. Instead, it finds itself sandwiched between two very large, powerful players: the MoD and the MoIA, which each have their “own” ATO/JFO veterans under their care. Responsibilities shared between the MoVA and other ministries are not necessarily sensibly distributed. To name just one example: while the MoVA is supposed to formulate policy, the MSP provides all veteran benefits. Generally, inter-ministerial cooperative structures are not sufficiently institutionalized to support generating and implementing joint policy.¹¹⁸

“As soon as the minister changes, new policies come in. What is needed is a mid-level dialogue to separate the political from the bureaucratic level.”

– Former Senior MoH Official ¹¹⁹

The prevalent opinion is that Ukraine is still a place where knowing people is important – thus, cooperation often depends on informal, personal connections.

For the MoD, the ongoing war takes priority over veteran reintegration, which it considers the MoVA’s concern.¹²⁰ While this position is understandable, it also hampers the MoVA’s efforts, since the MoD remains a crucial reintegration actor. Both veterans and civil society actors ideally imagine military duty as a lifecycle, in which the MoD prepares soldiers for active service before they join the army and subsequently equips them for demobilization while they are still serving. The MoD is formally in charge of such preparation, but there is a lack of information on whether this is done in practice.¹²¹ Civil society – together with the MoD – has made some advances through a Reforms Implementation Council, for example by initiating a Center for Mental Health to assist with the psychological effects of war and transition during a soldier’s final year of active service. Such efforts make important contributions to veteran return and reintegration processes early on, but they hinge on the MoD’s contribution.

118 Interview with MoIA official, October 16, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

119 Interview with former senior MoH official, September 3, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

120 Interview with senior MoVA official, September 15, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

121 Several current or former MoVA officials gave slightly different answers when asked about this. Their common conclusion was that they do not know to what extent – if at all – the MoD is currently investing in preparation for demobilization and reintegration. We were not able to obtain the MoD’s perspective because it declined our interview requests.

The MoIA is also equipped to make important contributions to reintegration due to its political weight. The ministry recently launched an initiative to tackle PTSD (called “Facing Life”), building on cooperation with the MoD, the MoVA and the MoH, as well as civil society actors.¹²² Still in the development phase, this project will focus on strengthening diagnostic capacities. While this is a potentially positive initiative, other areas of reintegration remain unaddressed. The MoIA does not have an internal mechanism in place to ensure a consistent transition for its own veterans returning from Donbas. This can be potentially dangerous – for instance, if traumatized war veterans serve as police officers.

Administrative challenges to inter-ministerial cooperation are exacerbated by the fact that the Ukrainian security sector lacks parliamentary oversight.¹²³ Even though the Verkhovna Rada Committee on National Security and the Committee on Law Enforcement have formal responsibility for overseeing the armed forces and the police respectively, both the MoD and the MoIA are very large, opaque structures. Therefore introducing parliamentary controls and hiring more civilians to work at the MoD would be crucial to increasing accountability.¹²⁴ This could in turn help to strengthen inter-ministerial cooperation and to increase awareness of reintegration measures.

More Data Is Needed For Coherent Government Policies

A significant lack of data greatly hinders the formulation of a coherent government policy on veteran reintegration. No one knows the exact number of veterans or how they are distributed across Ukraine, and there is also no comprehensive data on the rate of employment, suicide or domestic abuse.

“We don’t know our clients.”

– MoVA Official¹²⁵

Most researchers reinforce these data gaps by using a snowball technique for their interviews: the same veterans are interviewed many times, while the attitudes and needs of others – especially those in rural areas, prisons or psychological institutions – remain understudied.¹²⁶

Societal and political sensitivities around veteran affairs also contribute to this lack of data. Ministerial officials’ misguided sense of the need to protect veterans (or their own ministry) feeds into this phenomenon. For instance, the MoIA does not

¹²² Interview with MoIA official, October 16, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

¹²³ Akimenko, “Ukraine’s Toughest Fight.”

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Interview with MoVA official, September 9, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

¹²⁶ Interview with civil society representative, August 25, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

include “veterans” as a separate category when registering suicides, as this could be perceived as discrimination against veterans.¹²⁷ The MoD maintains a registry of military personnel who presumably committed suicide during their service, but not all suicides are registered because the families of the deceased would no longer be eligible to receive benefits.¹²⁸ In this way, the lack of data may be the result of good intentions, but it ultimately hampers the understanding of the extent to which veterans commit suicide and reinforces the trauma that families experience. It also makes designing policies to counter veteran suicides more difficult.

The ministries have an even stronger disincentive to record and report politically sensitive issues because they fear feeding into negative stereotypes about veterans. For example, the number of veterans who join far-right extremist movements remains unknown. Not a single official was able to provide any statistics on this issue, including those at the highest levels. Similarly, there is a genuine lack of knowledge regarding whether and to what extent veterans are recruited to join illegal private security groups.¹²⁹ Again, this is the result of a lack of capacity and the inter-ministerial cooperation required to generate and share this information. Furthermore, it also indicates a reluctance to discuss issues that Russian disinformation campaigns have heavily exploited in the past. While it is understandable that officials do not want to create any additional bad publicity for veterans, these efforts may be counterproductive. If the extent to which veterans are radicalized or become involved in criminal activities remains unknown, this gives credence to the stereotype that a majority of veterans are far-right radicals or take part in such activities. Filling these data gaps and openly communicating the results could help to reduce the general suspicion of veterans. Facts are the most useful tool against Russian propaganda and will help the MoVA’s ongoing efforts to create a positive image of veterans in society.

2

Political Polarization: Marginalizing Veterans Impedes Reintegration and Increases Potential for Radicalization

The lack of comprehensive reintegration policies and the limited employment opportunities for veterans, combined with a highly polarized environment in which weapons are readily available,¹³⁰ create a difficult political landscape in Ukraine. Many veterans are civically engaged and care deeply about the future of their country. This can be an impetus for positive engagement. It can also lead to potential radicalization, fueled by the ongoing conflict. A minority of veterans are currently working against a constructive discussion on political peace in Donbas. Some have joined radical right-

127 Interview with civil society representative, August 25, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

128 Ibid.

129 We asked several government officials about these two subjects, and none of them were aware of any statistics on or estimates of the extent of veteran participation in either far-right movements or criminal activities. It therefore remains unclear whether this information is available in other departments, agencies, or ministries and was not shared, or whether this information does not exist.

130 Anton Martyniuk, “Measuring Illicit Arms Flows: Ukraine,” Briefing Paper, Small Arms Survey, April 2017, accessed November 26, 2020, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP3-Ukraine.pdf>.

wing groups that pose a threat to reintegration: their narratives aim to polarize and divide Ukrainians. This alienates veterans from civilians as well as radical from non-radical veterans. Far-right groups are also prone to use violent tactics. Since these groups have the loudest voices when it comes to veteran affairs, the public tends to perceive them as representative of all veterans. In effect, this drowns out the voices and opinions of the majority of veterans.

“Most veterans are pretty neutral or passive. [...] The problem with those veterans who are very politically active is that they tend to forget about their brothers-in-arms who might be in a worse condition than themselves. For psychological or physical reasons, they may not be able to reach out for help or to participate in the activism. Those people are left out most of the time.”

– Civil Society Representative¹³¹

Political actors can fuel radicalization by manipulating veterans or using them for publicity, thus increasing veterans’ mistrust of politics and politicians. Political, social and economic marginalization increases the appeal of far-right groups and makes some veterans vulnerable to private businessmen who try to recruit veterans who lack other options for their security services.

Veterans Are Important Political Stakeholders

For many veterans, particularly volunteer fighters, their political engagement during the Maidan protest movement and their combat experiences in Donbas represent a continuous struggle against the old, Soviet-style structures of bad governance and Russian domination. Upon their return, weak administrative structures are the next battle in the same struggle, and thus some veterans associate these structures with pro-Russian attitudes. This mindset creates societal and political fault lines between those who support an “independent Ukraine” (which translates into “supporting veterans”) and those who do not. As a consequence, veterans consider issues such as unsuccessful health reform, economic decline and corruption to be part of the same larger struggle as the ongoing conflict in Donbas.¹³² Many veterans believe it is imperative that all veterans stand up against injustice and any violation of law and order.¹³³ While some experience despair and apathy as a result of this constant struggle and wonder why they fought in the first place, others turn these feelings into action. This can take the form

131 Interview with civil society representative, August 25, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

132 Focus group results.

133 Ibid.

of positive social or political activism, such as working to secure female¹³⁴ or LGBT+¹³⁵ veterans' rights. However, for veterans who either have strong ideological convictions or few other options, this feeling of constant struggle opens the door to radicalization.

The line between criticism and radical action is not always clear-cut. The phenomenon of veterans criticizing President Zelensky's attempts to end the conflict in Donbas is a good example of this blurred line between democratic political engagement and far-right movements. There is a widespread conviction, both in the veteran community and beyond, that President Zelensky's current efforts to end the conflict amount to an acceptance of peace on Russia's terms, and veterans largely reject this. However, nationalist movements have also pushed the rhetoric that Zelensky's efforts to settle the conflict constitute "capitulation" or a return to "slavery." In October 2019, thousands of veterans and others attended a "march against capitulation" organized by the far-right Azov movement and veteran associations in Kyiv, among other sponsors.¹³⁶ The fact that nationalists have captured this debate discredits the necessary discussion about Zelensky's policies and the trade-offs that Ukrainian society is willing to make to achieve peace in Donbas.

The line is equally blurred when it comes to veterans' readiness to return to the frontline. Many veterans would be prepared to return to combat in the event of a renewed escalation, independent of their other ideological convictions. The conflict in Donbas remains an important part of their lives, and they often feel personally responsible for its outcome. Moreover, they do not want to pass on the task of resolving the war to their own children.¹³⁷ Far-right actors may share this motivation, but for them, renewed fighting also represents a chance to increase their standing in society:

“If there is renewed Russian aggression and the Ukrainian government shows weakness by trying to compromise between Russia and Ukrainian society, then the veterans will again regain their power and show who they are. The necessary network, the pyramid of power is already built within the veteran organizations, the battalions.”

– Veteran, male, Kyiv, Azov battalion ¹³⁸

In this way, each individual veteran may have a different incentive to return to the frontline in Donbas if the conflict escalates once again, but radical actors can use this personal choice as part of a larger power struggle.

134 Such as the Women Veteran Movement or the Invisible Battalion Campaign.

135 Interview with veteran, male, Donbas battalion, August 20, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

136 Andrew Roth, "Thousands March in Kyiv to Oppose East Ukraine Peace Plan," *The Guardian*, October 14, 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/14/thousands-march-kyiv-oppose-east-ukraine-peace-plan>.

137 Focus group results.

138 Interview with veteran, male, Azov battalion, September 5, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

Far-Right Organizations Spoil Social Peace

The danger posed by veteran-associated far-right movements and the extent to which nationalist ideology has infiltrated Ukrainian policymaking should not be downplayed, but it should also not be the sole focus of international attention on veterans. Nationalist movements and the threat they pose to Ukrainian democracy have received a disproportionate amount of coverage in international media. At the same time, when it comes to veteran affairs, these movements impede the social and political reintegration of veterans by rendering more moderate veterans virtually invisible, thus further alienating them from the rest of society.

Veterans hold a broad spectrum of views on nationalism, and only a minority of ex-combatants hold radical views or join nationalist movements. On one end of the spectrum, nationalism is considered patriotism – as one veteran put it: “I am also a nationalist for Ukraine’s independence, but I don’t believe my nationalism is dangerous to anyone.”¹³⁹ Many joined the armed forces or volunteer battalions on the basis of similar convictions. On the other end of the spectrum, several well-known far-right movements, including the Azov movement with associated structures such as Centuria or National Militia,¹⁴⁰ the Right Sector and others, advocate a nationalist ideology. There is no reliable data on the number of people who support these nationalist movements, but given that they stem from former battalions (or vice versa), veterans are prominently associated with them.¹⁴¹

The degree of societal influence generated by the nationalist activity of extreme-right groups varies greatly. The Azov movement and the corresponding National Corps party (Nazional’ny Korpus) are the most well-known of these actors and have succeeded in creating an international brand. While the Azov battalion was formally reintegrated into the Ukrainian National Guard in 2015, the movement exercises different functions today and may serve as an “organ of state security, a political party, a societal organization, and a protection provider for businesses.”¹⁴² Communal activities include a large community space outside Kyiv where, among other activities, children can receive training at a shooting range.¹⁴³ Freikorps is an example of a much smaller movement that has less than 20 core members, including some veterans and some people seeking combat experience. While substantially less influential, its members are known for their attacks against LGBT+ persons and have started an initiative to

139 Interview with veteran, male, state forces, September 5, 2020, Berlin/Irpin.

140 According to RL/RFE, approximately 5,000 people were part of the Azov battalion (later the Azov regiment) between 2014 and its integration into the National Guard (Dmitryi Kirillov, “Ekskursiya v ‘Azov’. Odin Den’ s Ukrainskim Polkom Spetsnaznacheniya,” Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, June 21, 2018, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29308146.html>). The number of current members of the Azov movement in its various forms is uncertain but is claimed to be around 10,000 (Michael Colborne, “There’s One Far-Right Movement That Hates the Kremlin,” *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/17/theres-one-far-right-movement-that-hates-the-kremlin-azov-ukraine-biletsky-nouvelle-droite-venner/>). The distinction between different structures associated with Azov, the former battalion and today’s movement is not always clear-cut.

141 Anton Shekhovzov, “Radikale Parteien, irreguläre Verbände. Ukrainische Milizen aus dem rechtsextremistischen Milieu,” in: Manfred Sapper and Volker Weichsel, eds., *Schlachtfeld Ukraine Studien Zur Soziologie Des Kriegs*, Osteuropa, Vol. 3–4 (2019), Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag.

142 Heinemann-Grüder, “Geiselnehmer oder Retter des Staates?” p. 61.

143 Interview with veteran, male, Azov battalion, September 5, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

lobby for the legalization of weapons for private use (“self-defense”).¹⁴⁴ At the ballot box, far-right groups in Ukraine have very little societal and political influence, but they have succeeded in infiltrating the mainstream discourse to a disproportionate degree.¹⁴⁵ As several analysts who research far-right movements and their connections to veterans have pointed out, radical right-wing actors, although small in number, are the most influential political actors in veteran organizing. Veterans do not always need to actively join such groups – in fact, they rarely become formal members. Rather, these groups infiltrate veteran unions and offer veterans funding or (more or less legal) side jobs. This can be attractive to those who are struggling in the formal job market. These groups can also offer something many others cannot: a narrative and an ideological underpinning for why fighting in the war made sense.



Far-Right Organizations: Freikorps

Freikorps is a small far-right organization based in Kharkiv. It was created in 2017 as a unit of volunteer fighters that was too small to be a battalion – only approximately 50 people – after almost all the volunteer battalions had been integrated into the army. Freikorps is made up of ideologically motivated ex-combatants and people who would like to gain combat experience. Younger conscripts receive training, more senior members go to the trenches so they can qualify for officer status at a later stage. All of this serves as preparation for a renewed escalation of violence in Donbas.¹⁴⁶ The group has a core of about 20 members who fulfill management functions, their average age is 24. Members have to pass both a physical and an ideological test, and women are not allowed to join. In addition, Freikorps has a circle of “candidates” and “supporters” made up of approximately 20 and 50 members respectively. The group made a name for itself by disrupting various events and discussions on LGBT+ rights in Kharkiv and violently attacking equality march participants in Kharkiv in 2019.¹⁴⁷ Its other ideological goals include the right for civilians to bear firearms and so-called patriotic education. Members plan to set up a political structure to promote national conservative values under a different name, as they are aware of the negative connotations of the term ‘Freikorps’. The organization receives funding from a mix of sources – primarily in-kind donations as well as some businesspersons who support the organization by providing members with jobs, including as security guards. One Freikorps member and veteran stressed that he had not experienced any discrimination in his encounters with the general public because he was openly carrying a gun.¹⁴⁸

144 Truth Hounds, “‘Fraikor’: Borotba Za Chystotu Ukrainskoi Rodyny, Hel-Laky i ‘Yakis-Tam Protystoiannia’” 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://truth-hounds.org/frajkor-borotba-za-chystotu-ukrayinskoyi-rodyny-gel-laky-i-yakis-tam-protystoyannya/>; interview with veteran, male, Freikorps, October 5, 2020, Berlin/Kharkiv.

145 Vyacheslav Likhachev, “Far-Right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy,” Analytical Brief, Freedom House, 2018, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/analytical-brief/2018/far-right-extremism-threat-ukrainian-democracy>.

146 Interview with veteran, male, Freikorps, October 5, 2020, Berlin/Kharkiv.

147 Truth Hounds, “‘Fraikor.’”

148 Interview with veteran, male, Freikorps, October 5, 2020, Berlin/Kharkiv.

Veterans Are Used for Political and Economic Gain

Veterans are sometimes used to serve political interests: in the past, political parties of all stripes have approached veterans for the sake of publicity.¹⁴⁹ As focus-group interviewees expressed, political parties also sometimes use veterans to manipulate or put pressure on their political opponents. This can further a sense of political marginalization among veterans and undermine their trust in the government.

A minority of veterans who lack other options constitute an attractive pool of potential recruits for powerful individuals who have underlying economic interests in pursuing criminal activities.¹⁵⁰ This should not be confused with veterans who work for legal private security companies, for instance as security guards. Very little is known about oligarch-sponsored private security groups and the types of services they provide. While the role ideology plays in this should not be overstated, some nationalist groups do have structures that can be readily used for this purpose.¹⁵¹ These types of paramilitary or criminal groups are not necessarily new: some existed prior to the Maidan protest movement, and some members who are now veterans were already part of these groups before they fought in the war. These organizations operate on a highly localized level and usually protect the infrastructure of a single businessperson. Given the localized nature of these operations, it is difficult to detect patterns because this would require the systematic collection of data on such instances. At this point, we have only anecdotal evidence of their activities.

It would be unfair to veterans in general to consider those who engage in criminal activities – whether against the backdrop of an extremist ideology or for pragmatic reasons – as representative of all veterans. This is not the case. At the same time, it would be unwise to ignore the clear risk of more veterans joining far-right movements or private businesspeople’s illicit security services if the Ukrainian government does not sufficiently prioritize reintegration efforts.

3 Societal Tensions: Growing Divisions Between Veterans and Civilians Lead to Alienation, Not Integration

Reintegration is not only the joint responsibility of veterans and the state, it is also a task for society more broadly. And it is indeed a challenging one. Ukrainian society has undergone profound changes since 2014. The ongoing conflict has changed the social fabric of many communities in which civilians, veterans and internally displaced people (IDPs) now live side by side. The conflict has affected and continues to affect all of their lives on different scales.

149 One representative of a veteran association in southern Ukraine described this phenomenon as follows: “Almost all the main, dominant parties in Ukraine came by and wanted some people to engage in their party.” Interview with veteran, male, veteran association representative, September 8, 2020, Berlin/Melitopol.

150 Marina Nagai, “Situational Analysis Case Study Kherson Region,” International Alert, 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Ukraine_Kherson%20Case%20Study_EN_2019.pdf.

151 Likhachev, “Far-Right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy.”

Ukrainian society is at the beginning of a lengthy process of finding ways for veterans and the larger population to coexist in communities without significant societal friction. These societal tensions are already growing, as we found in our focus groups. Veterans often feel misunderstood or disappointed by a perceived disinterest in the war among civilians. Consequently, they retreat into their peer groups or hide the fact that they are veterans from other community members. Civilians are inexperienced at interacting with returnees who are often mentally or physically strained, be they strangers or close relatives. This clash of different realities currently manifests in various forms of misunderstanding and estrangement: through social alienation, both in society at large and within veterans' personal support structures (i.e., their family and friends); through an increase in stereotypes enforced through skewed media representations; and in subsequent stigmatization of and discrimination against veterans.

Veterans' Place in Society Remains Undefined

After their formative combat experience, veterans often search for a new place in society. This process is challenging on several levels. First, combat experience influences how a person positions themselves within their surroundings. On an individual level, veterans generally agree that participating in the ATO changed them as people – in terms of their personality, their behavior, their values, and their perception of the world around them.¹⁵² These changes may manifest in heightened interest and engagement in society and politics, but they can also result in intolerance, frustration or even a propensity toward radical action. Veterans also differ in the extent to which they consider themselves members of a distinct group within society. For some, this identity is clearly important. While veterans joined the ATO for a range of reasons, the combat experience united many of them – for instance, in a shared understanding of patriotism, mutual trust and a constant desire to learn and improve. At the same time, they do not necessarily believe that the rest of society shares these traits.¹⁵³ As one veteran put it: “The war experience created a difference between those who served and those who did not.”¹⁵⁴ There is no indication that this sense of unity is diminished by veterans' different socio-economic backgrounds, which can starkly vary. However, not everyone shares such a strong sense of identification. Some regard their status as a veteran as just one part of their larger identity¹⁵⁵ and do not see a difference between their needs and values and those of other social groups.¹⁵⁶

Second, veterans' search for a place in society is significantly impacted by the unresolved conflict. How can veterans fully commit to civilian life when they are waiting with their bags packed, ready to return to the conflict zone the minute the conflict escalates again? Many veterans expressed a readiness to return to Donbas if new fighting erupts, and they felt that this uncertainty about the future impeded

152 Focus group result.

153 Ibid.

154 Interview with veteran, male, state forces, September 16, 2020, Berlin/Kharkiv.

155 Interview with veteran, male, Artemivsk battalion, September 5, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

156 Focus group result.

their ability to plan ahead.¹⁵⁷ Their constant psychological connection to the conflict prevents them from making the switch from “soldier” to “veteran.” This is often reinforced by their intense consumption of news from Donbas, not only through regular media outlets, but also in conversations with friends serving in the ATO/JFO.¹⁵⁸ The ongoing conflict keeps many veterans in limbo, preventing them from letting go and wholeheartedly building a new life.

“I, just like many of those who have been on the frontline, have my ‘battle box’ ready. It is right here, under the sofa – it contains all the necessary stuff for one week. Put it on the back and off we go! A four hours drive from Dnipro.”

– Veteran, male, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) East

Third, this feeling of uncertainty is connected to the lack of general societal debate about the conflict. If there is little space for the conflict in society, then the space for veteran affairs also shrinks. As the conflict in Donbas is so closely tied to both their past sacrifices and their plans for the future, veterans believe it is necessary to discuss the situation, as well as the future of non-government-controlled areas and Ukraine as a whole. “If we are building this country, then we need to understand what this country is made of and where it is going.”¹⁵⁹ Many veterans believe that the majority of Ukrainians do not share their perception of the need for debate on Donbas. They are reluctant to accept that the longer the conflict drags on, the more many civilians’ interest decreases. Veterans struggle to recognize that many civilians have moved on with their lives and returned to their everyday problems, whereas for them the war still feels like unfinished business.¹⁶⁰ While some consider this a personal issue that every veteran should come to terms with individually, others are clearly irritated and saddened, and they view the situation as a political stance against them. This poses an interesting dilemma because both perspectives are understandable. For veterans, it is frustrating to see a loss of interest in the conflict among those they risked their lives to protect. Most veterans do not expect to be treated as heroes, but they still believe in the cause.¹⁶¹ At the same time, civilians – especially those with no close ties to people directly involved in the conflict – want to return to a certain level of normality instead of waiting for the end of a conflict that seems as if it will continue indefinitely.

157 While this was a prevalent phenomenon in the focus groups and the interviews conducted for this study, other quantitative research indicates that about half of the veterans have no intention of returning to the conflict zone; see IOM, “Life after Conflict.”

158 Focus group results.

159 Interview with veteran, male, representative of a veteran business in Kyiv, September 18, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

160 Interview with civil society representative, September 10, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

161 Focus group results.

The situation is particularly challenging for veterans who are also internally displaced persons (IDPs): they often feel that a real discussion on the future of the non-government-controlled areas is not taking place.¹⁶² This shows that veterans are part of a larger group of people affected by the war who are all striving to find a place in society. However, many veterans do not like to consider themselves part of the same group as IDPs, as illustrated by the vehement protests against merging the Ministry for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories (which is responsible for IDPs) with the MoVA in 2019. This attitude once again reflects veterans' strong sense of group identity as well as a belief that their standing as defenders of Ukraine must be valued and not diminished by claiming that other groups are equally affected by war. IDPs have different needs and problems, which require their own political solutions.¹⁶³ However, like veterans, IDPs' needs are also unmet – perhaps even more so, because they lack the strong lobby that has pushed veteran affairs into the spotlight in Ukrainian politics. While it goes beyond the scope of this report to analyze the complex relationship between veterans and IDPs, it is clear that societal reintegration will require veterans, civilians and IDPs to find ways to communicate with each other.¹⁶⁴

Veterans Search for A Place in Their Social Environment

The search for a new identity takes place not only in society at large, but also in a veteran's immediate social environment. Similarly to the broader societal context, relations between veterans and their families and close friends are often characterized by a lack of communication and mutual understanding. Some veterans struggle to obtain support from their families, largely because their partners, parents and siblings are overwhelmed, inexperienced and do not know how to best approach a person who has experienced the trauma of war. Consequently, families and friends sometimes avoid the topic entirely – to the detriment of veterans, who would often like to express themselves but do not find or dare to claim the space to do so in their most intimate environments.¹⁶⁵ Others lose their support systems because family members or friends disapprove of their combat activity: either they are confronted with disapproving remarks (e.g., “we did not send you there”) or they lose their friendships entirely. In the light of this inexperience in communicating with veterans, or to avoid unpleasant comments and the pressure to justify their actions, veterans sometimes consciously avoid mentioning their background in conversations with civilian friends and acquaintances.

Thus, veterans' alienation from society and their resulting orientation toward peer groups proceeds similarly at the individual level as it does in society more broadly. Many veterans' social environments have changed dramatically since they returned

162 Interview with veteran, male, representative of a veteran business in Kyiv, September 18, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

163 International Crisis Group, “Nobody Wants Us: The Alienated Civilians of Eastern Ukraine,” Report no. 252, October 1, 2018, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/252-nobody-wants-us-alienated-civilians-eastern-ukraine>.

164 Interview with former senior MoVA official, October 13, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

165 Interview with mother of a veteran/former PoW, September 5, 2020, Berlin/Dnipro.

home: while their pre-conflict circles of friends have shrunk, they have formed new friendships among their comrades-in-arms. Many veterans only feel truly understood within this group, where they are sure to receive physical, financial and moral support, and where they feel they can trust those whose reliability and loyalty have been tested in extreme, life-threatening situations.¹⁶⁶ While veteran associations clearly function as an essential support system for many, they also reinforce many veterans' tendency to keep to themselves.

Veterans Face Stereotypes in Society

Stereotypes reinforce the developing gap between veterans and civilians, and have become more prevalent in recent years. In 2014 and 2015, a wave of patriotism and close attention to the events in Donbas went hand in hand with a positive attitude toward and “heroization” of ATO fighters. Today, the army remains one of the most trusted institutions among the general population in Ukraine.¹⁶⁷ However, veterans agree that societal attitudes toward the conflict, and toward veterans in particular, have changed for the worse: the image of the patriot who defends their homeland, raises conscientious children, starts their own business, and works for the benefit of the country has been replaced by a view of veterans as people who have mental health problems, substance abuse problems, issues with aggression, and who will not shy away from using a weapon.¹⁶⁸ It is difficult to counteract this particular stereotype, as these issues are in fact prevalent phenomena among veterans. Another common accusation is that veterans joined the ATO to gain privileges and benefits. The latter criticism is often directed at female veterans, who are confronted with a combination of stereotypes of both veterans and women. For instance, people question whether they really participated in combat, assume they forged or bought their UBD certificate, or believe they only went to the frontline to find a husband.¹⁶⁹ Men who did not participate in combat are particularly likely to discriminate against women who did.¹⁷⁰

“I had this awful situation. I was seven months pregnant and traveling home from work on the shuttle bus. I showed my UBD card to the driver, but he laughed and said, ‘What body part did you use to earn it?’”

– Veteran, female, FGD East

¹⁶⁶ Focus group results.

¹⁶⁷ International Republican Institute, “Sixth Annual Ukrainian Municipal Survey.”

¹⁶⁸ Focus group results.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with veteran, female, Ukrainian Women Veteran Movement representative, September 4, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

The media plays a central role in creating and maintaining these stereotypes of veterans. Since the onset of the conflict, Russian propaganda has pushed the narrative of the dangerous veteran, particularly with regard to volunteer fighters. Therefore, many veterans associate a high consumption of pro-Russian state television with a pronounced anti-veteran bias. Political attitudes toward Russia and Russian attempts to influence narratives and destabilize Ukrainian society vary across different regions.¹⁷¹ A regional MoVA official who works in southern Ukraine described the difficulty of promoting reintegration in an area where “a large share of the population thinks of veterans as criminals and fascists [...] and is waiting for either the return of the Soviet Union or [...] the liberating Russian army.”¹⁷² Ukrainian media also plays a role in reinforcing existing stereotypes. Whereas news reports covered the mourning of “fallen heroes” in the early years of the conflict, reports on veterans today primarily focus on violent behavior.¹⁷³ A politicized Ukrainian media landscape¹⁷⁴ in which media outlets are mostly owned by oligarchs also drives polarizing views – either by reinforcing highly divisive issues (e.g., regarding the Ukrainian language¹⁷⁵) or by amplifying Russian narratives.¹⁷⁶ Other international media outlets, for example in Europe, are just as unhelpful in their news coverage – whether intentionally or unintentionally – because they tend to fixate on far-right extremism.

As with all stereotypes, views on veterans in Ukraine are often based on anecdotal evidence. Veterans stress that a small number of comrades behave in ways that are unacceptable, and they are not surprised that such people are condemned and disrespected.¹⁷⁷ This grain of truth is particularly detrimental when stereotypes fall on fertile ground: insecurity about how to interact with veterans prevails among civilians, and those who do not have personal ties to a veteran are often unable to get the reality check they need to challenge their biases. At the same time, as long as psychosocial support for veterans remains sporadic, war-induced trauma can lead to violent behavior, and in rare cases, individual veterans may pose a threat of violence to the general public.¹⁷⁸ Many of these generalizing narratives could be more easily refuted if there were reliable statistics on the extent to which veterans actually engage in violent or criminal behavior.

These stereotypes can translate into stigmatization of and discrimination against veterans. For example, bus drivers are reported to deny veterans free public transport even though they are entitled to this benefit, while others experience discrimination

171 Focus group results.

172 Interview with local MoVA official, September 14, 2020, Berlin/Mykolaiv.

173 Focus group results

174 Erik Albrecht, “In Ukraine’s Vibrant Online Media Landscape, Viability Remains a Challenge,” *Deutsche Welle*, July 1, 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/in-ukraines-vibrant-online-media-landscape-viability-remains-a-challenge/a-49062846>.

175 “Conflict in Ukraine Not Driven by Differences in Language, Says Report,” International Alert, March 7, 2017, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.international-alert.org/news/conflict-ukraine-not-driven-differences-language-says-report>.

176 Jakob Hedenskog and Mattias Hjelm, “Propaganda by Proxy – Ukrainian Oligarchs, TV and Russia’s Influence,” Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20Memo%207312>.

177 Focus group report.

178 “Prokuratura Prosit Arestovat’ Veterana, Kotoryy ‘Miniroval’ Most Metro,” *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, September 20, 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2019/09/20/7226845/>.

online. Many are also discriminated against when they try to return to their old jobs or start a new career. Employers are often reluctant to hire veterans because they fear they may not be suited for the workplace.¹⁷⁹

“Once this employer said, ‘OK, I will hire this ATO veteran. But what if I reprimand him or make some remarks? Will he shoot me?’ I mean, they do not understand and seem to be scared.”

- Veteran, male, FGD West

This helps to explain why many veterans prefer to work with other veterans or start their own businesses: 38 percent of veterans who participated in a recent IOM survey indicated that they had either opened their own business, planned to do so, or would like to but did not have the necessary funds.¹⁸⁰



Veteran-Owned Businesses: The Veterano Group

The Veterano Group is perhaps the most famous veteran-owned business in Ukraine: almost all interviewees mentioned it as a positive example of veteran reintegration. Veterano Pizza opened its doors in Kyiv in 2016 and now has franchises in Mariupol, Odesa and other cities. Veterano Bar and Coffee Veterano followed. The most famous product, however, remains the pizza that Veterano Group regularly delivers to the frontline.¹⁸¹ Founder Leonid Ostalzev and his team established several rules – veterans will be prioritized for employment, veterans will receive discounts and 10 percent of the profits will go to charities for the children of fallen soldiers.¹⁸² As one of the founding members of Veterano Group put it, this chain of restaurants is not simply about giving jobs to a couple of veterans. Rather, it is meant to show that veterans are able to open a business and produce a high-quality product – a statement that, while the war changed each veteran individually, this experience nevertheless made them stronger. However, the same member also explained that many people today associate Veterano Pizza less with veterans and more with their product – pizza.¹⁸³

179 The World Bank, *Socio-Economic Impacts of Internal Displacement and Veteran Return: Summary Report*; focus group report.

180 IOM, “Life After Conflict,” p. 30.

181 “Bogdan Chaban: Razgovor o Veterano Pizza, Dostavke Pitsy v Zone OOS i Planakh na Budushchee,” *Posteat*, August 23, 2018, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://posteat.ua/obzory/bogdan-chaban-razgovor-o-veterano-pizza-dostavke-picy-v-zone-oos-i-planax-na-budushhee/>.

182 Interview with veteran, male, representative of a veteran business in Kyiv, September 18, 2020, Berlin/Kyiv.

183 Ibid.

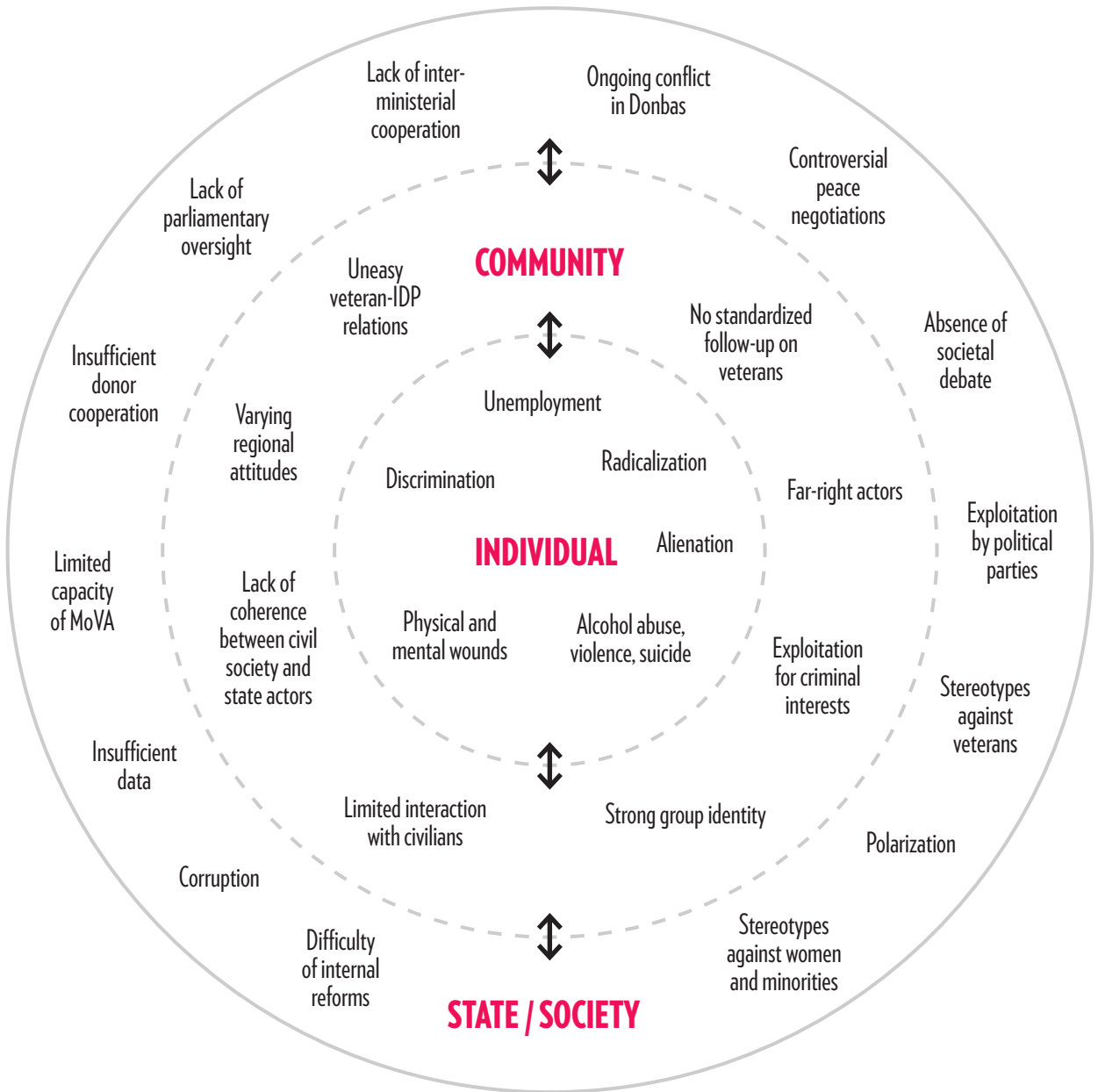
Discrimination in the workplace is particularly damaging because an occupation is important in establishing a new purpose in life – for many, it is an essential part of reintegration, as regular work helps them to develop routines and adapt to a new way of life.¹⁸⁴ In a larger sense, stereotypes also have an indirect impact on veterans because they influence international actors’ decision-making on future projects. Many international stakeholders who have yet to conduct programs for veterans are hesitant to do so for fear of indirectly funding far-right extremist groups. They also see veterans as instigators who are resisting efforts to settle the conflict in Donbas.¹⁸⁵

To mitigate negative stereotypes, the MoVA is currently making an effort to promote a positive image of veterans. This campaign is designed to present veteran success stories to the public. While these efforts to improve the public image of veterans are commendable, they cannot take the place of the essential societal discussion that needs to take place in order to understand what role Ukrainians expect veterans to play within their society.

184 Focus group results.

185 Van Metre and Boerstler, “The Trip from Donbas.”

Figure 6: Risks of and Challenges to Reintegration at the Individual, Communal and State Level



Policy Recommendations

① **Civil society and state actors should tackle veteran reintegration with a whole-of-society approach.**

To combat the growing divide between civilians and veterans in Ukraine, state, local and international actors should assist with the reintegration of veterans into their families and communities. Structural change at the ministerial level will take time, but Ukrainians cannot wait for these reforms: the growing communal frictions must be addressed.

- 1.1. **Both the Ukrainian government and external actors should increase opportunities for interaction between veterans and civilians** so as to strengthen social cohesion and address stereotypes. Joint consultations and dialogues on issues of common interest to both Ukrainian veterans and civilians could enhance communication and – in time – understanding. Therefore, existing community engagement programs, such as the joint IOM and EU program or UNDP’s community programs, should be expanded throughout Ukraine. In designing these programs, special attention should be paid to the complex relationship between IDPs and veterans.
- 1.2. To address international donors’ reluctance to fund veteran affairs organizations, **Ukraine needs a screening process to vet and classify veteran associations and civil society organizations.** An external partner – for example, an international organization – could fund and organize these efforts.
- 1.3. **Civil society actors and veteran unions need to structure their organizations in such a way that female veterans are able to join and contribute.** This means creating the basic conditions for participation, such as installing essential facilities for women and offering childcare at veteran centers and association locations. Spaces of support for veterans should also include gender-sensitive consultations. These organizations should be safe spaces where female veterans can openly discuss and address issues such as sexual harassment experienced on the frontline. Training on sexual harassment for male veterans could also help achieve this goal.
- 1.4. **State and international actors should fund targeted solutions for rural areas**, such as online resources and virtual or telephone consultations. Existing initiatives, including mobile brigades for rural areas, should be expanded. MoVA regional offices could coordinate these solutions, provided they receive the appropriate staffing, funding and training for the task. The MoVA and international actors must pay careful attention to balancing the support given to civil society organizations across different regions in Ukraine. One-stop shops, such as “veteran spaces” or the Veteran Hub, where veterans can seek advice on all things related to veteran affairs, are very promising initiatives and should be expanded.

1.5. **Independent media have a role to play in addressing stereotypes and overcoming political polarization**, and they can also help address social stigma related to mental health. They should be strengthened so that they can operate and compete in Ukraine’s media landscape. Existing programs to improve media literacy in communities should be reinforced, specifically on the topic of veteran affairs and reintegration.

2 **Central public administration authorities need to formulate and coordinate a comprehensive policy on veteran reintegration.**

Effective administrative action for veterans hinges on MoVA capacities and inter-ministerial coordination. The MoVA will only be able to fulfill its mandate if it is properly funded, staffed and politically supported. To increase cooperation between ministries, the political value of institutional cooperation must be enhanced. Standards for service provision should be developed and harmonized across regions and communities, regardless of the political differences between Kyiv and the regions.

2.1. Two years after the Ministry of Veteran Affairs was created, its mandate and capacities have yet to be properly aligned. This will require adequate funding, proper staffing and political buy-in from the presidential administration and other ministries. **The MoVA’s basic structures and senior management need to be kept in place long enough to allow for continuity and strategic planning.** An “advocate” for veteran affairs inside Ukraine’s presidential administration – an individual who has both the will and the standing to make reintegration a political priority at the highest level – could achieve substantive changes.

2.2. While providing services for Ukrainian veterans of all armed conflicts, particularly those with disabilities, is a permanent task, **the state should create a program dedicated to the comprehensive reintegration of ATO/JFO veterans.** This program should have clearly defined deliverables and run until these targets are met.

2.3. **The MoVA’s administrative reach into Ukraine’s different regions must be increased.** Its regional offices can serve as important mediators between veterans and state and local authorities. The Ministry of Finance and the Verkhovna Rada should therefore allocate the necessary staff and budget to fulfill this task. Regional MoVA offices and local authorities, in particular local branches of the MSP, should jointly discuss and agree on common standards to guide benefit provision for veterans, taking local context into account. They should consult trusted civil society partners as part of this process, since such partners will be most aware of veterans’ needs.

2.4. While the main responsibility for veteran reintegration lies with the MoVA, **other ministries legally involved in benefit provision for veterans should have a clearly designated department or in-house focal point for veteran affairs.** Building on existing working groups and ad-hoc meetings to coordinate between

these departments, cooperation needs to be institutionalized. To make this a priority, the MoVA could periodically extend an open invitation to international donors or deputy prime ministers. At this point, it is not sensible to create any additional departments or structures.

2.5. The MoD is obliged to prepare active-duty soldiers for demobilization and reintegration, and should act on this mandate. International actors involved in reintegration programs for professional military veterans, such as NATO, have some leeway to influence the incentive structures in the MoD's cooperation with the MoVA. For instance, they could require the MoD to obtain the MoVA's agreement for each NATO-funded program.

2.6. The MoVA needs to fill its data gaps: in order to design programs and classify problems, existing needs must be identified. Closing data gaps, including on politically sensitive subjects, would enable more targeted programming and ensure donor support. In addition to closing these gaps, data management should also be improved. In cooperation with the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Digital Transformation, the goal should be to develop a central, comprehensive, inter-ministerial database. While the planned e-registry will bring significant improvements in this regard, international actors can step in and support further software and capacity-building for data management.

3 Central and local authorities must improve benefit provision for veterans in the short term.

As advocated by almost all reintegration stakeholders, the current benefit-centered system should be replaced by a needs-based one in the long-term. This will require a concerted, strategic effort on the part of the Ukrainian ministries and parliament. While this is underway, several short-term steps can be taken to improve benefit provision for veterans under the existing support scheme.

3.1. Veteran status: The MoVA, the Cabinet of Ministers and the MSP should implement the planned e-registry as soon as possible.

3.2. Land allocation: An independent oversight body should evaluate or take charge of land allocation to avoid corruption. Given that many veterans would prefer cash loans, parliament and the relevant ministries could consider ending the policy of land allocation support altogether.

3.3. Economic reintegration: Existing education and training programs should be made more accessible to all veterans. If proper oversight can be guaranteed, a micro-credits program for those planning to start their own business could be an option to improve economic reintegration.

3.4. Employment: Civil society and international actors could organize joint events and training for businesses and veterans to foster mutual understanding and tackle

stereotypes as part of an overarching campaign to create a more positive image of veterans. Trade unions and employers' associations can play a crucial role here, as the reluctance to employ veterans is a structural rather than an individual issue.

3.5. Psychological rehabilitation: While efforts have increased in this sphere, overall access to psychosocial support must be improved and expanded to include veterans' family members. Veterans themselves have proposed programs to prepare families for reintegration. This could be accomplished through consultations and joint activities with other families, but will require many more specially trained psychologists. In cooperation with relevant civil society actors, the responsible ministries and international actors should fund specialized training programs for psychologists as well as train-the-trainers initiatives. External actors can fund existing initiatives for continuous peer-to-peer support, consultations for veterans and their families, and mobile services, which should be expanded throughout the country. Social stigma related to psychosocial support should be addressed – for example, through an awareness campaign.

3.6. Physical rehabilitation: Rather than investing in specialized veteran hospitals, it makes sense to give veterans easier access to specialized services (a “veteran package”) in the context of the standard healthcare system. In the short-term, the MoH and international partners should invest in training for civilian doctors, teaching them to recognize and treat health issues and conditions stemming from combat activities. Doctors should be chosen according to standardized criteria to avoid cronyism. Moreover, more attention must be paid to war's effects on women's physical and mental health. The MoH should also consider delegating the task of assessing individuals' disability status to an independent agency.

4 The Ukrainian government should step up its efforts to counter the radicalized fringe and engage with veterans about the future of Donbas in Ukraine.

Political engagement with veterans is crucial, and not only because they are an important stakeholder in any lasting peace deal. An open political debate is necessary to engage veterans and disincentivize them from joining far-right, neo-fascist movements. These groups should be monitored and their role in the veteran community closely watched. Potential security risks associated with veterans should not be ignored, but they should also not be the sole focus of veteran engagement.

4.1. Both the government and civil society organizations should consider initiating a national consultation on reintegrating Donbas, in which civilians and veterans can engage in discussions on the issue. This could be one channel through which to amplify veterans' voices in a democratic, constructive way. A societal debate on the reintegration of the non-government-controlled areas will be crucial to the future of Ukraine, and engaging with veterans on this issue should not be left to those who aim to exploit them for ideological reasons and political or financial gain. Impetus for this initiative from Ukraine's presidential administration would be a good start.

- 4.2. A **more consistent approach to countering demonstrably far-right, neo-fascist organizations** is needed. The activities and funding of these organizations and movements should be closely monitored. International actors should keep a careful eye on potential connections between Azov and other similar movements or far-right groups in Europe. A screening and vetting process such as the one proposed above can help to distinguish trusted organizations from radicalized groups.
- 4.3. **Individual use of private security groups for political or personal gain should be studied independently** so as to shed light on the issue and disperse the fog of general suspicion that surrounds veterans. This would also contribute to the MoVA's aim of promoting a more positive image of veterans. Investigative journalists can play an important role in informing the public about such activities in a nuanced way, and thus help to enforce accountability.

5 International actors should help fill existing capacity gaps and step up their programming on veteran reintegration.

International actors should step up their engagement on the issue of veteran reintegration, acquire the necessary expertise to support comprehensive, targeted programming on this issue and coordinate their efforts. The EU and NATO could use their leverage vis-à-vis the Ukrainian government to press for an alignment of standards on veteran issues in existing programs.

- 5.1. **International actors should go beyond the negative headlines and recognize veteran reintegration in Ukraine as an important issue distinct from the ongoing conflict.** They should be aware that the majority of veterans does not live in the conflict zone and should consider decoupling veteran affairs from programming related to conflict areas where this is currently the case. While veteran reintegration is ultimately related to a long-term resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, it also has a societal dimension that must be addressed in its own right. Rather than making veterans another “special interest group” box to tick, international actors should allow for comprehensive, targeted veteran reintegration programming. Existing community programs should be significantly expanded to foster (more) community dialogue. The EU delegation in Ukraine could include a specific section on veterans in its reports to Brussels.
- 5.2. **International actors involved in veteran reintegration in Ukraine should closely coordinate their efforts in order to cover different aspects of reintegration.** Donors should consult directly with the relevant ministries (for instance, during inter-ministerial strategic meetings), civil society organizations and communities in their attempts to cover different aspects of reintegration. To that end, a comprehensive mapping of existing veteran affairs programs would be very helpful.

- 5.3. **International actors need to be aware of their main target groups.** Programs assisting either MoD or MoIA veterans are beneficial only for a certain subset of veterans. Based on the aforementioned screening process, international actors can and should step up their funding in the areas outlined above, notably regarding community reintegration.
- 5.4. **International actors should carefully push for and monitor gender-responsive veteran reintegration.** Civil society initiatives offer sufficient information, expertise and experience on which international actors can build, as well as new opportunities for cooperation. At the same time, external actors often have limited knowledge of the reintegration challenges female ex-combatants face. They should thus be ready to learn from the Ukrainian experience in this regard.

Annex: List of Interviewees

All interviews were conducted online between August 20, 2020 and October 17, 2020.

#	Stakeholder Group	m/f	Organization	City, Region
1	Veterans	m	State Forces	Kharkiv
2	Veterans	m	Volunteer Battalion (OUN, Tornado)	Kostiantynivka
3	Veterans	m	State Forces	Irpın
4	Veterans	m	Volunteer Battalion (Donbas) & State Forces	Kyiv
5	Veterans	m	Volunteer Battalion (Artemivsk)	Kyiv, from Donetsk Region
6	Veterans	m	Volunteer Battalion (Azov, National Corps)	Kyiv
7	Veterans	m	Volunteer Battalions (Freikorps)	Kharkiv
8	Veterans' Families	f	Mother of a Veteran / Former PoW	Dnipro
9	Veteran Associations	f	Ukrainian Women Veteran Movement	Kyiv
10	Veteran Associations	m	Union of ATO Veterans	Melitopol
11	Veteran Associations	m	Society of ATO Veteran Unions	Odesa
12	Veteran Associations	m	Union of ATO Veterans	Irpın
13	Veteran Associations	f	YARMIZ	Kyiv
14	Veteran Business	m	Veterano Group	Kyiv, from Donetsk Region
15	Civil Society	f	Employment Center for Free People	Kyiv
16	Civil Society	m	Smile for Ukraine	Kyiv/San Sebastián
17	Civil Society	f	Invisible Battalion	Kyiv
18	Civil Society	m	Lifeline Ukraine	Kyiv
19	Civil Society	f	N/A	Kyiv
20	Civil Society	f	Veteran Hub	Kyiv
21	Civil Society	f	The Legal 100	Kyiv
22	Civil Society	f	Mental Health Consultant Working with Veterans	Dnipro
23	Civil Society	f	Lviv Center of Service Provision for Participants in Combat Activity	Lviv
24	Civil Society	f	Civilian Volunteer for ATO Veterans	Kyiv
25	Administration	m	Ministry of Veteran Affairs (Official)	Kyiv
26	Administration	m	Ministry of Veteran Affairs (Sen. Official)	Kyiv
27	Administration	f	Ministry of Veteran Affairs (Frmly. Sen. Official)	Kyiv
28	Administration	f	Ministry of Internal Affairs (Official)	Kyiv
29	Administration	m	Regional Office of Ministry of Veteran Affairs (Official)	Mykolaiv
30	Administration	f	Ministry of Health (Frmly. Sen. Official)	Kyiv

#	Stakeholder Group	m/f	Organization	City, Region
31	Parliament	f	Verkhovna Rada, Special Commission on the Status of Veterans (Member of Parliament)	Kyiv
32	International Organization	m	OSCE	Lviv
33	International Organization	m, f	UNDP	Kramatorsk
34	International Organization	m	NATO	Kyiv
35	International Organization	m	EU Delegation	Kyiv
36	International Organization	f, f	IREX	Washington, DC/Kyiv

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