



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

THE HARD RETURN

MITIGATING ORGANIZED
CRIME RISKS AMONG
VETERANS IN UKRAINE

JULY 2024

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CONTENTS

- Executive summary** 2
 - Key risks.....3
 - Recommendations4
- Why talk about demobilization, disarmament and reintegration now?** 5
 - Demobilization and disarmament6
 - Reintegration.....7
- Organized crime risks: From anomie to assassination**..... 11
 - The disaffected: ‘There is no logic here. There’s not even humanity’ 13
 - The vulnerable: ‘Nerves are not made of iron’ 17
 - The muscle: Private security and legalized violence 20
 - The entrepreneurs: More guns, new gangsters 21
- Towards a positive veterans policy** 26
 - Joining up civil society, business and the state 26
 - Process and information..... 29
 - Give veterans a stake – and an outlet..... 30
 - The problem of help 33
 - Data: Putting risks in perspective 36
 - Amendments to veterans policy specifically related to organized crime risks..... 36
- Conclusion** 37
- Notes** 38



FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report assesses the organized crime risks associated with veterans in Ukraine. It is a complicated, sensitive subject: while the hot state of the conflict means that very few military personnel are being demobilized at present, there is also concern that discussing veterans in such a context may stigmatize them.

But, as this report highlights, such risks cannot be ignored and preparations for demobilization now may help prevent negative outcomes in future. Our research identifies the following as key organized crime risks: the incidence of drug use among service personnel, the profusion of weapons in the country and the possibility of veterans being recruited into or forming organized crime groups or joining private security firms as muscle. More tangentially, a sense of disaffection among veterans – rooted in a perception that the state is not keeping its promises to provide individual support or reform society as a whole – may also drive a wedge between veterans and society, generating friction and increasing the risk of confrontation, perhaps with violence.

Veterans policy in Ukraine is a fast-moving field. The Ministry for Veteran Affairs is spearheading the new veterans law – a crucial development to ensure that Ukraine’s legislation is fit for the new realities of a post-conflict period that will see a million or more veterans in society. Work is also underway on draft laws governing the legal ownership of weapons, which will bring much-needed clarity and control to the millions of trophy weapons in the country.¹

With a new demobilization law yet to be submitted to parliament (at the time of writing) and relatively few veterans in Ukraine today, 2024 is a critical window of opportunity. Ukraine should use this time to determine and implement a comprehensive veterans policy before the wave of demobilizing veterans arrives. Although there was no upsurge in veteran-related organized crime in the 2014–2022 period, the size of the veteran population will be much larger. Even a fraction of these veterans falling into crime will have a significant impact on Ukrainian society.

At present, there is little sign of institutional readiness. Implementation of the initiatives announced to date has been patchy and slow, and the Ministry for Veterans Affairs has lacked a permanent head for much of the first half of 2024. Demobilization, for those who are eligible, is a frustrating and even humiliating process. Our interviews with veterans revealed scarce access to information about benefits, with many unaware of what was available to them. In terms of rehabilitation, there is a lack of effective psychological, physiological, legal and social support for veterans. Some of this is explainable by the very real strictures the war has imposed on Ukraine: training that usually takes years must be completed in a matter of weeks.



More than a million people are currently serving in the Ukrainian armed forces. Reintegrating so many veterans into society will be a massive task, and requires urgent policy action. © Anatoli Stepanov via Getty Images

But the need remains. Since the full-scale invasion, civil society organizations, many of which have worked in veterans affairs since 2014, have been making strenuous and effective efforts to cover the gaps in care and provision for veterans, from physiological and psychological support to forming business collectives and designing a ‘whole-life’ veterans policy. Yet many feel they are working in isolation, with the state resisting their attempts to work collaboratively and introduce strategic and innovative thinking to veterans affairs.² Only the state can deliver a veterans policy with the scope and resources needed, but NGOs have much to offer, not least their agility and ability to deliver help where it is most needed. Both the state and civil society will be needed if Ukraine is to deliver a programme of ‘deep prevention’ – a strategy that addresses veterans’ needs at the level of contributing social factors rather than the individual level – which will reap the most dividends in reducing exposure to organized crime risks. The hard reality is that, as Ukraine dedicates as many resources as it can to the day-to-day conflict, it must also begin planning for the decades-long aftermath.

Key risks

- Lack of a strategic veterans policy (covering the whole life experience of veterans and their family members) risks increasing the difficulty of veterans reintegrating into society and may expose them to organized crime risks.
- Use of drugs among soldiers, some of whom may have prior addiction issues, could result in some veterans becoming users or low-level dealers in civilian life and possibly committing petty crime (e.g. theft) to pay for drugs, together with the serious health and social impact of substance abuse.
- Profusion of weapons in the country, most of which are trophy weapons, may replenish the arsenals of organized crime actors and feed longer-term arms trafficking, domestically and transnationally. The ready availability of weapons among veterans also poses a social stability risk, with isolated incidents of veterans using weapons and grenades in civil disputes or self-harm.

- Some veterans may seek to sell their military fighting and organizational skills to organized crime groups as hitmen, muscle or in other roles; some may form their own groups. Drone operators may be particularly in demand due to the potential of drones to be used for smuggling, intelligence-gathering and lethal attacks.
- In the licit sphere, veterans may be recruited as muscle by private security firms. This risks an increased use of 'power business' as a way to resolve business disputes, open new markets and undermine competitors – to the detriment of Ukraine's economic operating environment, the reputation of which will be crucial to outside investors in the future, especially around reconstruction.

Recommendations

- A law on demobilization is an urgent priority and prerequisite to all veterans-related policy. The state should also work in partnership with civil society to produce a truly comprehensive and strategic draft law on veterans policy, including provisions to mitigate the risks of veterans falling into crime.
- A capacity to collect data related to veterans' life paths should be established to ascertain the true scale of issues facing veterans, to avert stigmatization and to target help appropriately.
- Society must adapt to veterans, not the other way around. Information should be simplified, digitized and streamlined to smooth the transition from military to civilian life. A digital passport of soldiers' service records could be uploaded to Diia, the state platform for government e-services, to automatically provide access to benefits without veterans having to navigate a paper-heavy bureaucracy. Information regarding opportunities and support should be sent to veterans, rather than the veterans having to search for them.
- The new law on weapons ownership should be expedited to bring clarity and control to the vast number of weapons in civilian hands. Similarly, for veterans who want to use their military skills, the draft law introduced in April 2024 regarding the legalization of private military companies may offer a useful outlet and divert them from organized crime groups.
- Veterans must feel included and appreciated by society, but it is also true that the best source of support may be other veterans. The state should support the formation of veterans networks, which can provide informal social and psychological support in addition to the professional help some veterans may require.



WHY TALK ABOUT DEMOBILIZATION, DISARMAMENT AND REINTEGRATION NOW?

The conflict in Ukraine is creating arguably the most complex and large-scale demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) challenge of the 21st century. As of April 2024, there were a million Ukrainians in military service, 300 000 of whom were in active combat, in a conflict that is now entering its tenth year, with a drastic increase in intensity since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022.³ As of March 2024, some 70% of Ukrainians had relatives who were fighting or had been fighting since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.⁴ Weapons have poured into the country from Kyiv's Western partners and in the hands of the Russian aggressors. The number of veterans is rapidly growing: unofficial estimates put the number of wounded and demobilized Ukrainian service personnel at between 100 000 and 120 000.⁵

The idea of discussing DDR at this stage may seem counterintuitive. DDR implies the end of fighting, but the war currently shows no sign of being close to a resolution. Fierce fighting continues along the eastern front, with the mobilization of still more troops to hold the front line a national priority. Ukraine continues to target Russian naval assets in the Black Sea and Crimea and oil refineries in Russia, and missiles regularly rain down on Ukrainian cities and Russian military installations.⁶ In April 2024, President Volodymyr Zelensky finally signed a new mobilization bill that would help rebuild Ukraine's fighting capability after the costly counteroffensive of 2023.

There are also more theoretical obstacles to discussing DDR in Ukraine. At a conference in Lviv hosted by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in April 2024, many civil society participants said they were unfamiliar with the term, while those who knew of it doubted its applicability to Ukraine. Indeed, DDR has not been much used in conflicts with strong command and control structures. DDR efforts have primarily taken place in very different contexts in Latin America and Africa, mainly 'unconventional' wars with non-state armed groups where the state has no tools to disarm the combatants and needs to design a disarmament process. The majority of participants in Lviv were instead focused on ensuring that Ukraine had a robust veterans policy.⁷

While there are clear overlaps between a veterans policy and DDR, the latter provides a more comprehensive framework to describe the process by which a soldier becomes a veteran, and so points to a wider range of risks and needs that policymakers must consider. Of course, many DDR lessons do

not apply to Ukraine – organized crime will not act as a spoiler to peace processes, as has happened elsewhere⁸ – but the broad themes remain pertinent. The process of demobilization is not nearly as fraught when dealing with a formally constituted army as, say, a non-state armed group, but it still has a shaping, and potentially alienating, influence on the relationship between soldier and state. Similarly, disarmament of the military may be an ‘in-house’ affair, but the profusion of trophy weapons and the lack of a dedicated law on weapons means that tackling the availability of weapons in Ukraine is an all-society challenge. In sum, thinking about DDR in a specifically Ukrainian context allows us to see a broader range of cross-cutting risks.

It was with this thinking that the GI-TOC set out to map the attendant organized crime risks, with the aim of informing and promoting a positive policy with provisions to tackle these risks. At the heart of this research is a series of extensive interviews conducted with veterans and the aforementioned conference in Lviv, which gathered prominent civil society actors to discuss the issue of returning veterans in general and organized crime risks in particular. This work is also complemented by extensive desk research in Ukrainian and English.

Demobilization and disarmament

This research highlights the critical need for action across all three pillars of DDR. Two years after the full-scale invasion, demobilization remains deeply problematic in Ukraine, with no legal framework governing the process. Demobilization was one of the key issues debated in the mobilization law (Bill 10449, ‘On Mobilization’) tabled in December 2023, which was originally intended to increase the number of conscripts by lowering the mobilization age to 25 and abolishing the ‘partially eligible’ status; the draft also made provision for potential demobilization after 36 months.⁹



The lack of a demobilization law has sparked protests, such as this one in October 2023 in Kyiv (the banner reads, ‘Does life-term mobilized = life-term imprisoned?’). © Yan Dobronosov/Global Images Ukraine via Getty Images

However, the law became mired in political power struggles, not least after the sacking of General Valery Zaluzhny, the armed forces commander who first raised the need to mobilize more soldiers, for which the bill was intended to provide the legal framework.¹⁰ The law finally passed in April 2024, but only after the provisions relating to demobilization had been removed.¹¹ The decision caused an outcry among soldiers, many of whom have been fighting since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, some even since the Maidan Revolution in 2014.¹² The absence of fixed terms of service is also likely to cause deep stress and an increased sense of social injustice among soldiers.¹³

Demobilization remains available only according to certain exemptions set out under martial law: for instance, to care for disabled dependants, or being disabled themselves.¹⁴ Yet even for those with the legal right to demobilize, the process can be gruelling and demoralizing. Veterans told us of their struggles with a Soviet-style system that left them feeling, in the words of one prominent veteran, 'humiliated'.¹⁵ The lack of information and opacity of the process repeatedly emerged as the major concerns, with one veteran commenting: 'There is not even a list of these documents that they need and want. They seem to be making it up as they go along.'¹⁶ Obtaining the necessary documents for a medical discharge and confirmation of combatant status was mired in confusion, paperwork and the whims of commanders, although corruption could grease the wheels.¹⁷ An April 2024 law to remove the 'partially eligible' status in military medical examinations will help to clear up problematic grey areas in assessment (and the need for subsequent check-ups),¹⁸ but much greater reform is needed.

Disarmament

One area of general agreement among interviewed veterans was the strict disarmament processes in place in the army, with failure to return an issued weapon acting as a bar to demobilization. This, however, may be of limited use in tackling the broader issue of disarmament facing Ukraine. The availability of weapons and explosives has dramatically risen in the country, largely due to abandoned 'trophy' weapons in front-line areas. In April 2024, the Interior Ministry estimated that there may be 1–5 million trophy weapons in civilian hands.¹⁹

In this context, gun control will be a central issue. A Central Gun Registry portal was launched in mid-2023 and, in March 2024, a law requiring the declaration or surrender of trophy weapons within 24 hours passed in its first reading in parliament.²⁰ But still, there is no dedicated law to govern the legal right to firearms in Ukraine. There are two draft laws in parliament, one of which outlines the legal basis for civilians to keep weapons until 90 days after the end of martial law, with a provision to legalize trophy weapons.²¹ The second law will govern civilian acquisition of weapons.²²

Reintegration

Kyiv is struggling to implement a coherent veterans policy, even though much of the basic groundwork is already in place.²³ The legal framework regarding social protections and benefits has been on the statute books since 1993 (although it owes much to Soviet precedent), and stipulates a comprehensive package for veterans (see Figure 1), while the new vision set out by the government in 2023 is wide-ranging and impressive.²⁴ In early 2023, the Verkhovna Rada (national parliament), led by the Cabinet of Ministers, sanctioned an ambitious action plan to transform the digital management of benefits, improve the provision of psychological assistance and create veteran development centres to enhance professional skills.²⁵ The action plan stipulated that the Ministry for Veteran Affairs should prepare amendments to the law on government benefits by August 2023 and prepare a draft law 'On the principles of veteran policy' by October 2023.²⁶

Since then, some steps have been made to streamline the process for acquiring combatant status, which confers a higher salary and additional post-service benefits, but progress in other areas has been slow and uneven.²⁷ At the time of writing, a brief, undated 'veterans policy' has appeared on the official government portal with various theme areas, but it seems to be only a preliminary outline.²⁸

The e-Veteran portal is non-functional in certain aspects regarding eligibility for benefits,²⁹ while the upgrading of the flagship Borodyanka Centre for Social and Psychological Rehabilitation is behind schedule and subject to allegations of financial mismanagement.³⁰ Even the war dead have not escaped this bureaucratic lag. As of March 2024, Zelensky had still not signed the law creating a National Military Memorial Cemetery in Kyiv, which the Ukrainian parliament passed in April 2023,³¹ and debates over its design continue.³²

Type of guarantee or benefit	Participant in hostilities (Articles 5, 6)	Person with a disability due to war (Article 7)	Participant in the war (Articles 8, 9)
Free medicine	Yes	Yes	Yes
Free provision of sanatorium-resort treatment	Suspended for 2023	Suspended for 2023	Suspended for 2023
Rent	75% discount	100% discount	50% discount
Heating of homes	75% discount	100% discount	50% discount
Free use of public transport within Ukraine	Yes	Yes	No
Free use of hospitals upon retirement	Yes	Yes	Yes
Free annual medical examination	Yes	Yes	Yes
Payment of temporary disability benefits	100% of average salary regardless of length of service	100% of average salary regardless of length of service	100% of average salary regardless of length of service
Preferential right to keep position in the event of a reduction in the number or staff of employees	Yes	Yes	No
Access to 10-year loan for the construction and reconstruction of residential buildings and plots	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tax benefits, including tax-free cash assistance and housing assistance	Yes	Yes	Yes
Priority for household services, public catering, housing and communal services, intercity transport, social care services	Yes	Yes	Yes
Preferential right to admission to institutions of higher/vocational pre-university education	Yes	Yes	No

FIGURE 1 Selection of legislated social guarantees and benefits for veterans.

SOURCE: Law of Ukraine 'On the status of war veterans, guarantees of their social protection' no. 3551-xi of 22.10.1993, https://veteranfund.com.ua/legal_consultations/social-garnt-pilgi/

'A full-scale war is going on, and nothing has changed.'

- A VETERAN

Information is difficult to find and parse, with 70% of veterans being unaware of what the state has to offer.³³ 'I'm demobilized, I have to go somewhere to get that help,' said one veteran, '[but] I just don't understand how it works, where I'm supposed to get that help from.'³⁴ Another veteran was even more pessimistic, remarking, 'There is no support. Maybe they have it somewhere on paper, but it doesn't actually exist.'³⁵ The Ministry for Veteran Affairs – urged by parliament to take a leading role in the coordination of veteran affairs – is perceived to be passive and ineffective. Its minister resigned in February 2024 and, at the time of writing, a permanent head has yet to be appointed, although the Ministry has started to show more purpose and willingness to communicate.³⁶ According to a March 2024 survey of 1 000 Ukrainian civilians, 63% of respondents felt that the government was not meeting its obligations to veterans.³⁷

The issue of tightened funding also looms large. According to a high-level official from a prominent international organization, Kyiv will be forced to cut back on social spending in 2025 in order to remain afloat, even with Western aid, due to goods trade deficits. According to IMF baseline estimates, Ukraine will incur a cumulative current account deficit of US\$52.6 billion between 2024 and 2033 and will require US\$85.2 billion in external financing between 2024 and 2027 (rising to US\$103.9 billion in downside projections).³⁸

Already the pinch is being felt. Free treatment at rehabilitation sanatoria – cited as the major need by more than 60% of veterans³⁹ – was suspended in 2023. According to an interview with Veteran Hub, an NGO service provider, the government lacks the funding to meet veteran needs, because there will be simply too many veterans.⁴⁰ Promises made at a time when only 1.5% of the population were beneficiaries (as was the case in the 2014–2022 period) will be impossible to keep when the figure reaches an estimated 10–30% as a consequence of the Russian invasion.⁴¹

If the government cannot keep its promises to veterans, then it risks losing legitimacy and authority in the handling of veteran affairs. A consolidated package of benefits that the government can actually deliver would be a far better solution than a raft of benefits that exist only on paper, especially if the package is discussed with veterans before its finalization. The implications of this state of affairs are far-reaching: as one October 2023 assessment concluded, 'The current state policy regarding veterans and their families carries profound risks for its beneficiaries and the entire Ukrainian society.'⁴²

If these conditions remain unchanged, a significant set of organized crime risks may manifest, from distrust of the state to veterans bringing their lethal skills to criminal groups. Although there was no dramatic increase in veterans becoming involved in crime in the period between 2014 and 2022, the number of serving military personnel dwarfs that of the pre-invasion period. If even a small proportion of this group falls into crime, the effect on society will be dramatic. A comprehensive DDR programme cannot remove all these risks, but it can lessen them. As Yurii Hudymenko, a military serviceman and political leader, said:

All negative scenarios will happen. There will be veteran alcoholism. There will be veteran addiction. There will be veteran suicide. Veterans will definitely engage in crime. This is a fact – it is in every country in the world. The question is scale. Will it be 1% of veterans, or will it be perhaps 50%?⁴³

This issue must be discussed extremely sensitively. It is imperative that veterans are not stigmatized or seen to have any innate drift towards criminality: a conclusion also supported by research on American and British veterans, which found that military service was not a significant determinant in post-service criminality.⁴⁴

While acknowledging that there is nothing inherent in the veteran that predisposes them to certain types of crime or even crime in general, and that all the risks outlined below are not the exclusive preserve of veterans but apply to broader populations, it must also be acknowledged that veterans face a unique set of challenges in civilian society. Their experience in war, the wounds (physical and psychological) they carry and their acute perception of civilian society all demand to be acknowledged, not as negatives, but as realities to be understood and managed. That criminal risks are currently underplayed in public discourse is understandable – there is only one brief mention of the crime risk in the 2023 Veterans Hub policy assessment⁴⁵ – but headline writers will have no such compunction.⁴⁶ It is precisely to avoid the uninformed tarring of veterans as crime threats that these risks must be discussed in the open, now.



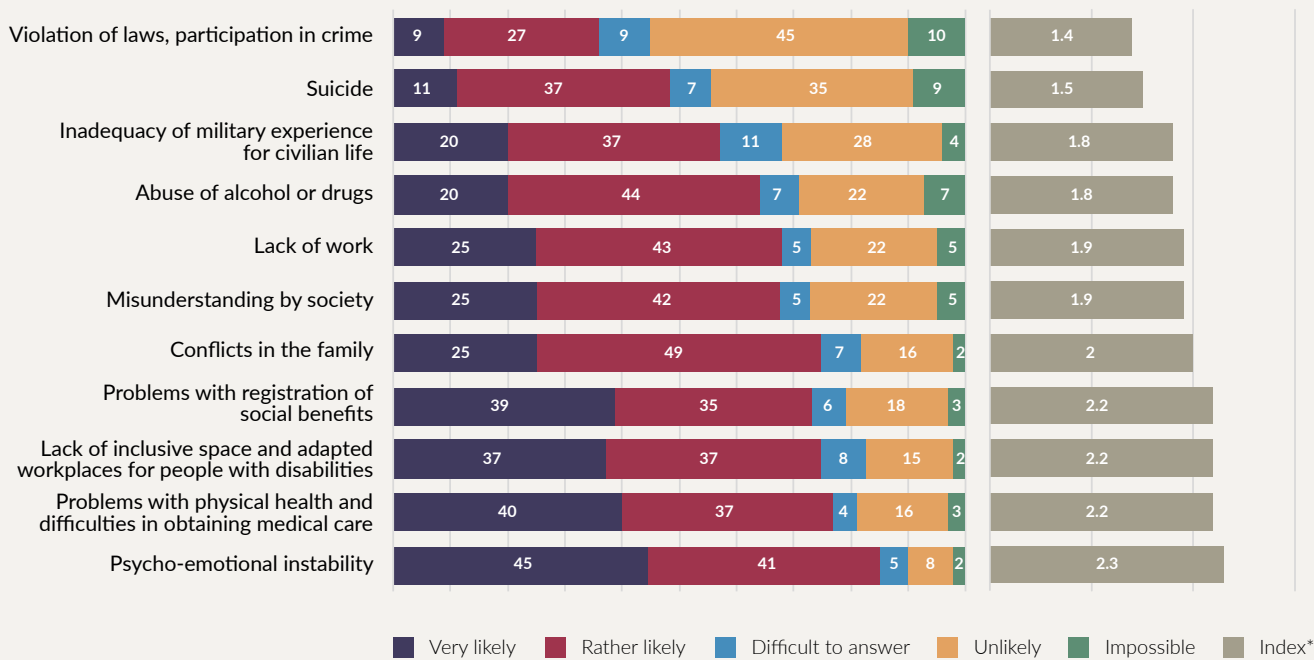
ORGANIZED CRIME RISKS: FROM ANOMIE TO ASSASSINATION

To what extent are veterans likely to become involved in organized crime? What forms might this involvement take? How helpful are past analogies, such as the explosion of criminality in the midst of the Balkans conflict, or the experience of Soviet veterans of the Afghan war?⁴⁷ Which determining factors are unique to one situation, and which are shared? What types of risk are more prevalent – and most impactful?

These questions require an investigation into the fundamental drivers towards criminality and the contexts that may enable crime. To illustrate, while only 9% of respondents to a March 2024 survey of 1 000 Ukrainian civilians conducted by the Ministry of Veteran Affairs suggested that veterans were ‘very likely’ to become involved in crime or break the law, the figure was higher for other factors that may have an indirect link to crime, such as abuse of alcohol or drugs (20%), misunderstanding by society (25%) and lack of work (25%).⁴⁸ The correlation between these last three categories and crime is not absolute by any means, but they also cannot be discounted as contributing factors: all serve to increase the distance between the veteran and civilian life.

This section considers the crime risks for veterans through four groupings:

- The large population of veterans who will emerge with their faith in Ukrainian society shaken (‘the disaffected’)
- Those whose wartime experiences and addiction problems render them vulnerable to crime (‘the vulnerable’)
- Those who seek to use their skills in legal sectors that may shade into illegality (‘the muscle’)
- Those who will actively seek to use the skills acquired in combat to work outside the law in organized crime (‘the entrepreneurs’)



*The index ranges from 0 to 3, where 3 is very likely, 0 is impossible

FIGURE 2 Civilians' responses to a survey assessing the likely risks faced by veterans returning from the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

SOURCE: Veteran Fund, Рейтинг Моніторинг, 27-та хвиля: Образ ветеранів в українському суспільстві, 2-5 March 2024, https://veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/doc/RG-UA_Veterans_1000-UA_032024_press-1.pdf

The relationship between these four categories and organized crime is complex but grows more direct from categories one to four.⁴⁹ Veterans who feel abandoned, ignored or thwarted do not, of course, necessarily become criminals, but these feelings will have a disruptive impact on the fabric of civilian life. If tens – or hundreds – of thousands of ex-soldiers emerge from the war harbouring a sense of betrayal and hostility towards the state, the health of the state will be affected. Feelings of rage, anomie and injustice run against the sense of social well-being, cohesion and purpose that is society's best defence against crime.⁵⁰

Such feelings may also be a driver of criminality.⁵¹ Drawing on general strain theory, which suggests that poorly or unjustly treated people may react with criminal behaviour, Heather Scheuerman developed a model of three types of injustice – distributive (unfair allocation of resources), procedural (inconsistently applied procedures) and interactive (unfair, rude or degrading treatment) – that may increase the likelihood of criminalization.⁵² Reading across to the Ukraine context, it may be argued that soldiers and veterans who see corrupt actors flourishing, a system that does not make good on its promises, and a society that isolates, alienates or otherwise fails to understand veterans could all see increased susceptibility to criminality. This could manifest as resistance to authority or vigilante justice.

For 'the vulnerable', the connection is more direct, although the motive is one of necessity. Addiction, trauma and lack of economic opportunities are all obvious gateways to low-level crime, although not all in this category will engage in them.

'The biggest problem with this whole process is that the rules of the game change afterwards.'

- A VETERAN

In the category of those who move into private security, the lines between legality and illegality may be blurred. The majority of private security firms in Ukraine offer tailored, in-depth support to their clients in legitimate ways, but some may be less scrupulous. Veterans hired as muscle, mostly by registered companies, may engage in strong-arm tactics at the limit of legality or beyond, including the intimidation of their company's rivals or under the guise of 'protection' or 'dispute resolution'. The fact that clients may include business and political actors means this 'power business' (as it was described by one Ukrainian NGO) may influence how business and politics is done in Ukraine.

In the final category, the relationship is direct: actors for whom organized crime offers a place where their military skills will be recognized and rewarded. This includes those who join criminal groups as hitmen, gang members, armed robbers, drone pilots or traffickers.

The disaffected: 'There is no logic here. There's not even humanity'

For the vast majority of soldiers, demobilization is not currently an option, but talking to a few veterans whose circumstances had allowed them to leave, it became clear that the process was, on the practical level, intensely frustrating and, on the symbolic level, reflective of a state mired in Soviet-style bureaucracy, petty corruption and a lack of respect for veterans. Instead of receiving the benefits and payments due, soldiers are forced to go through a long ordeal of trying to prove that they were actually a soldier. Even though demobilization occupies a brief period of time compared to reintegration, an effective demobilization process can greatly help a soldier's reintegration into society. The converse is also true.

The general lack of information, the requirement to see many doctors to perform often-redundant checks, the manipulation of medical records to minimize health concerns,⁵³ the forms that are difficult or impossible to obtain,⁵⁴ the profusion of paper and lack of digitization, and the failure to process claims: these and other factors all contribute to a protracted, often surreal process that places the soldier at the mercy of an opaque, unfeeling and inflexible system.⁵⁵ As one veteran commented,

A guy was sitting in the corridor missing a third of his head. Couldn't you have written this man off when he was lying there, in the ward? Was it not possible to take the opinion of one doctor who would write him off and hand over these papers so that he does not have to go through these 20 doctors who are not needed?⁵⁶

At root, there is a lack of consistency and predictability. Military commanders play an outsized role and verbal and unofficial orders take precedence. One veteran described at length his Catch-22 odyssey to obtain a combat order form, which would enable him to receive more benefits after demobilizing:

I call the clerk and say, 'I need Form 6 for the UBD [combat status].' 'Oh, you don't need a Form 6,' the clerk says, 'you need something else, I'll find out.' Three days pass, and I write back. It turns out the commander forbade issuing Form 6 while the brigade is in the combat zone. This is his verbal order, but they follow it strictly. The brigade will issue it when it leaves the combat zone. 'Okay,' I said, 'I understand.'

'I was 100% motivated [at the start of the full-scale invasion]; now it's zero.'

- A VETERAN

Then [after trying to obtain the Form 6 by different means] I was demobilized, and I called the unit and said, 'I need a Form 6 now.' They said, 'No, if you were in the unit, we would have given it to you, but since you are discharged, we won't give it to you. Let the military registration and enlistment office make an official request.'¹⁵⁷

The same veteran also highlighted a similar sense of unofficial guidance stymieing the process with wounded soldiers:

It is not easy to get to a doctor because there are not enough people, and I understand that they have some kind of verbal order to not let everyone go, an unofficial order. [...] We had a guy in our unit, his leg is swollen, he can't walk, and the doctor says on the phone, 'Just put some cabbage on it and will go away in a day or two.' It's funny – and it's not.'¹⁵⁸

Even those with serious and life-threatening wounds may struggle to obtain the necessary paperwork. We spoke to the father of one soldier who had been seriously injured at Bakhmut, who was moved between different hospitals and home while doctors imposed conflicting treatments that ultimately exacerbated the damage. Although the medical treatments were free, his family found themselves paying for his care because, although the papers had been submitted months earlier, the military medical commission had yet to make a decision. According to the soldier's father, 'These were 11 months of abuse. They just threw him away and did not treat him, did not want to take him. [...] I did not expect that he would be thrown back and forth in the process of treatment. [...] There is no logic here. There's not even humanity.'¹⁵⁹

Another veteran construed the difficulty of obtaining proper documentation as part of a 'deception' by the state to prevent soldiers from accessing help: 'Our mayor promises those who are fighting to bring some papers and we will give them [UAH] 20 000 [€460] as financial assistance from the state [...] but when you go there, they ask for a document that you can't physically get. It's a joke.'¹⁶⁰

Several veterans confirmed that they had been forced to hire lawyers:

If you do what you are supposed to do [on your own], you will not achieve anything – they will keep returning these documents to you and it can go on even until the end of the war. So I hired this lawyer. He looked at my documents and said that there were more than enough grounds for permission [for demobilization].¹⁶¹

Another veteran took the same approach: 'I consulted with a lawyer about what to do. He told me what kind of documents I needed. I needed notarized copies of all the documents, my pension certificate, disability, all these jokes.'¹⁶²

Troubles adjusting

Demobilization is the first step on a long road back to becoming a civilian, and re-entering non-army life can be an alienating experience for many veterans. 'When you've been in the army for two years and then you come home to your city, where people don't really feel the war, it's unusual and a bit wild [...] You have to rewire your brain... re-establish it, reformat it, block it, and do it in a new way. It's hard.'⁶³

The role of the family in helping veterans to transition and adjust to civilian life was seen as crucial, but not uncomplicated.⁶⁴

How do you come back as a warrior who's had the edges of normality erased? How do you get him back into a normal society? Family. Every warrior would like to go home and take care of his wife. And if you don't have a kid, have a kid. [...] A stronger catalyst for the socialization of the military [is] hard to imagine.⁶⁵



Veterans returning to civilian life face many obstacles and risks. © Sergei Supinsky/AFP via Getty Images

The obstacles to this idyll become higher as the war goes on. Returning veterans will find it difficult to settle back into family life and relationships will come under strain. Millions of Ukrainian refugees – overwhelmingly women and children – are also still in Europe and, as the years pass, more may integrate and decide to remain in their adopted countries. Indeed, protracted separation is already leading to a surge in breakups and divorces in 2023. The number of divorces rose by a third from 2022 to 2023, although the 2023 number was still lower than the pre-war period. However, these statistics include only couples without underage children or property claims against each other; those cases must be taken through the courts and can take years.⁶⁶ One soldier, quoted in *The Guardian*, said that 'families are falling apart because the husband and wife are not together for six months or a year'.⁶⁷ As a consequence, while many post-war nations experience a dearth of young men, Ukraine may experience a decrease not only in the male population but also of young women and children, making the country's social fabric harder to repair. According to a 2024 UNHCR survey, about two-thirds of Ukrainian refugees are still willing to return, but increasing uncertainty about the war is bringing that number down.⁶⁸

At the basic economic level, the shock of having to adjust to a much-reduced salary after demobilization is significant. Front-line soldiers in Ukraine are paid UAH 100 000 (€2 300) a month, far higher than most other sectors in Ukraine, which rarely pay above UAH 20 000 (€460) a month.⁶⁹ This disparity

in turn can affect their ability to reintegrate into the civilian workforce. As one veteran reflected, 'After the experience of receiving UAH 100 000 a month, you just realize that you are giving a lot to that new post office, and you will not get the salary you deserve, you know? And it doesn't suit me.'⁷⁰

A veteran from the 2014–2022 period who set up his own business took a hard line about how to approach this exceptionalist trend among veterans:

They demand a higher salary, some kind of special treatment, and unfortunately, in our world, this does not happen. [...]They will have to compete with non-veterans and acquire some new skills in order to grow professionally. Shouting that 'I am a veteran, so give me something, a higher salary, better working conditions or a new position' [doesn't work]. He can count on gratitude and respect from other people, but he cannot demand anything for it from the business he comes to work for. He can demand it from the state. It is the state that he defended, apart from his family, his relatives and friends.⁷¹

Many businesses have adopted more pro-veteran policies than this veteran suggests (see below), but the quote nevertheless points to a grey area of responsibility that is particularly stark for injured veterans who cannot return to their former work and may lose their livelihoods. In this case, the veteran may feel in limbo, reliant on the state for benefits and ongoing rehabilitation, as well as requiring training and adapted workplaces in order to work again.

The workplace is not the only area where a returning soldier can feel ill at ease. More intangible is a sense of dislocation and antagonism around civilians, especially in places where the war seems far away or where civilians seem largely indifferent. Speaking of a period of leave from the front lines, one veteran remarked,

When we had the opportunity to go somewhere in civilization to buy food or things, we noticed that someone was driving an expensive car. Questions immediately arose as to why he was not in the service, why he was driving around, and so on. There were claims: 'What are you doing here, why aren't you in the trenches?'⁷²

Another was more forthright:

Somewhere inside them, they [soldiers] are very outraged and offended by the fact that people do not want or are unable to perceive things as they are. That is, if there is a situation where there is a war, there is such evil, and people do not pay attention to it.⁷³

As one veteran explained, reactions to the civilian milieu will be varied. 'Some react calmly, and some can get drunk and shout "I fought there, I'm a hero", and so on. And this very often turns into a conflict, and maybe even a more serious one, with injuries.'⁷⁴ But even in the most understated form, the drawing of lines will be evident. 'Some people love *katsap* [derogatory for Russian] music,' said one veteran, 'You make a comment to them, and they start telling you that they grew up listening to it. I try to find a few such people, comment a little bit out loud to them, so that they know who they are.'⁷⁵

For other veterans, however, engaging with society on any level will feel impossible.

The vulnerable: ‘Nerves are not made of iron’

Mired in the trenches and under constant threat of aerial attack, soldiers’ experience of fighting in Ukraine is one of relentless hardship and danger. One veteran described the hardships on the front line:

For the last three months near Soledar, we lived in dugouts. The dugouts were, let’s say, half-finished. Different animals appear, including bedbugs, fleas, mice, and a lot of snakes. You have to serve in sunny weather, rain and frost, and no one cares. Sick or not sick, you swallow a handful of pills and go on, because you have no other choice.⁷⁶

The psychological toll of serving under such conditions can be extreme. According to one veteran:

Several people in my platoon had nervous breakdowns. One of my colleagues was sent for treatment. When he was discharged, he had to return to his place of permanent deployment, [but] he took a bus ticket and went home. He said that psychologically he couldn’t take it any more – he would go crazy or shoot himself or hang himself. [...] Nerves are not made of iron.⁷⁷

These psychological stresses can rupture social and economic stability once back at home. One veteran described an inability to be around people that led him to quit his public-facing job.

Why did I quit? I can’t stand people. I start having nervous, panic attacks. [...] It’s very stressful for me when I’m in the subway, when there are a lot of people in the morning, or around six o’clock, or in some shopping centres. [I need to find a job] not in the service sector or I’ll go crazy or I’ll kill someone.⁷⁸

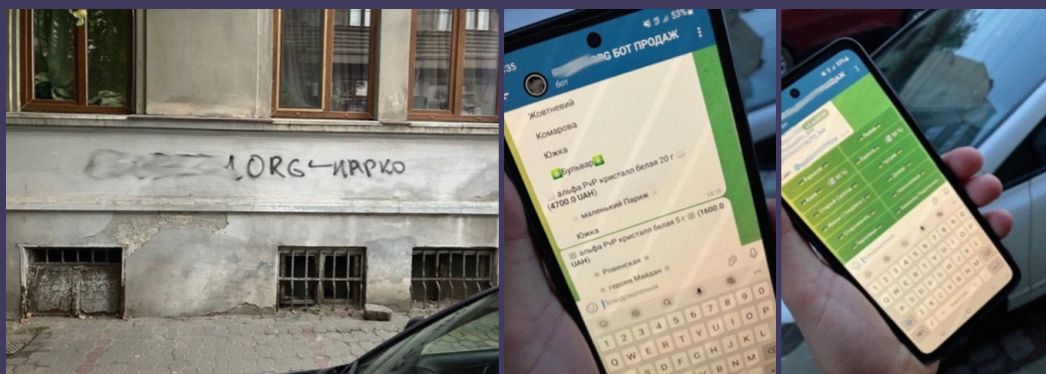
Repeating a pattern seen in Afghanistan and Vietnam, the war in Ukraine has also seen heightened levels of substance abuse among soldiers, particularly of alcohol but also of more dangerous substances such as synthetic cathinones, mainly alpha-PVP.⁷⁹ One veteran stated that drinking and drug use were not pervasive because they were severely punished in the army: ‘If you are the 300th [i.e. dead, because drunk], you endanger your comrades, because they think you have their back. [...] If you want to drink, then drink after our victory.’⁸⁰ But this account was contradicted by two others who stated that alcoholism was rife: ‘Alcohol is a big evil in the army now.’⁸¹ Asked if alcohol use would be an issue among returning soldiers, one veteran replied, ‘Definitely. [...] I was just talking to a colleague of mine who also quit [demobilized]. Every day, he’s going somewhere – slap, slap, slap [drinking heavily].’⁸²

In part, this reflects a failure to screen adequately during mobilization: there have been reports of people who use drugs being sent to serve and bringing their habits with them.⁸³ These soldiers then act as coordination points for both supply and demand. But it is also true that the large salaries paid to front-line soldiers make them a wealthy clientele for drug traffickers, and many soldiers without prior habits may have turned to drugs to cope with the horror of war, to stay alert to enemy threats and sustain themselves through protracted periods of fighting, or to find a state of relaxation after periods of intense combat. These factors form the perfect ecosystem for a thriving front-line drugs economy. Cannabis is the most widely used drug among soldiers, but synthetic drugs are also present, with drugs smuggled to the front line in a variety of ways, including through the postal system, in packages delivered by taxi drivers or volunteers (sometimes without knowing their contents) and organized crime actors bribing their way through checkpoints.⁸⁴ Soldiers themselves can also act as mules, as they have the passwords to move easily through checkpoints.

And back home, the drug traffickers are already waiting. There has been a massive increase in the production and availability of synthetic drugs in civilian society since the full-scale invasion, driven by the abrupt termination of the heroin supply from Afghanistan through Russia. According to the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, Ukraine's synthetic drug market has seen the largest increase of any drug market in the world, rising by 4.50 points between the 2021 and 2023 Indexes, largely as a result of the war.⁸⁵ Price has also played a part. As explored in a 2024 GI-TOC report, synthetic drugs such as illegally produced methadone, methamphetamine, amphetamine and synthetic cathinones (especially alpha-PVP) are cheap to buy.⁸⁶ It is also extremely easy (and relatively risk free) to purchase them, especially through Telegram.

Telegram: the go-to tool of drug traffickers

The messaging platform Telegram has become a useful tool for drug traffickers across Ukraine.⁸⁷ Walk around a city and you might see a handle graffitied on a wall. Type this handle into Telegram, and a channel opens of the same name. Open the channel and a bot will ask you to select your city from a list of places across Ukraine. Once you have done that, you will be presented with a 'menu' of drugs to choose from. Select what you want, add money to your account and complete the purchase. You will then be given the location of a 'drop' to collect the drugs. This mode of drugs retail is fast, automated and completely anonymous, providing protection for both seller and buyer. ■



Three steps to buying drugs using Telegram. 1. A graffiti tag in Chernivtsi, western Ukraine, displaying a Telegram drugs channel; 2. Order from a list of drugs; 3. Prices for alpha-PVP to be delivered by drop-off.

Photos: Supplied

These low barriers, combined with the extremely addictive nature of these drugs and the traumatic conditions of wartime life, have led to an explosion in demand in civilian life. There has been a marked increase in hospital admissions for conditions associated with alpha-PVP in particular. One state-run facility said in July 2023 that the number of patients with drug dependency issues had doubled since the invasion. Treatment in the private sector is expensive and also suffers from a shortage of capacity, especially since many private clinics closed after the invasion.⁸⁸

The compound effects of difficulties in holding down a regular job, addiction to drugs and alcohol (and lack of treatment options) and the legacy of psychological trauma and physical injury will make this population highly susceptible to joining the criminal ecosystem, either as customers of illicit products or as low-level functionaries attempting to make ends meet by engaging in small-scale drug trafficking, theft and robbery. Substance abuse may also contribute to rising levels of domestic violence, a trend also reflected elsewhere in the world, which a senior Ukrainian law enforcement official believes will be the biggest problem among veterans.⁸⁹

Another potential growth area for organized crime to exploit is gambling. There has been an increase in gambling among soldiers since the full-scale invasion, and criminals may be keen to serve this market through underground casinos and gaming houses.⁹⁰ Gambling was legalized in Ukraine in 2020, but if criminals can offer better odds – and easier credit – they may be able to exploit the veteran market.⁹¹ Online gambling, however, is likely to remain the first port of call. To defuse this risk, Zelensky signed a decree on 20 April 2024 that bars soldiers from accessing online casinos.⁹² Notably, this was the end result of a petition authored by Pavlo Petrychenko, a serving soldier who wrote that ‘gambling becomes the only way to cope with stress, and therefore quickly causes dopamine addiction and weakens their self-control’.⁹³ That said, it is not clear how the ban will be put into effect.

As stated earlier, a nuanced understanding of veterans’ vulnerability is necessary. A body of research looking at British and American veterans has found no proven link between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among veterans and criminal activity, although PTSD may increase risk-taking behaviour and suicide.⁹⁴ A study of Vietnam veterans found that the main variables that shaped convicted veterans’ engagement in criminal activities, in comparison with the veteran population outside prison, were the incidence of addiction issues and personality disorders that were apparent before military service.⁹⁵ However, a study of British veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan published in *The Lancet* found that, while there was no overall link between veterans and rates of violent offending – the most common type of offending among veterans – once demographic adjustments had been made, this was not the case for veterans who had served in an active combat role.⁹⁶ There, rates of violent offending were markedly higher than for non-combat veterans. Alcohol misuse was strongly associated with violent offending.⁹⁷ An OSCE survey in Ukraine in 2019 found that cases of violence and sexual abuse were twice as prevalent in families of veterans of the 2014 Donbas conflict, compared to other families.⁹⁸

Another interesting nuance is the fact that, due to conscription guidance, most veterans will be relatively old – as of early 2024, the average age of a veteran in Ukraine was 43.⁹⁹ In most cases, these vulnerable veterans will not be starting or joining gangs but struggling to cope. Reduced impulse control and desperation will be the key drivers of criminal activity, not any desire for a gangster’s lifestyle.

One of the key forms of this non-organized crime may be random violence. At the lowest level, this could be drunken brawls in the street, but the easy access to weapons in the country also lowers the threshold for these to turn lethal. Ukraine is already seeing isolated incidents of veterans pulling the pins on grenades in domestic settings, drunk soldiers shooting comrades, and even the case of someone firing an RPG at an apartment block in an apparent act of hooliganism.¹⁰⁰ In 2021, a brain-damaged veteran of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) launched to fight the 2014 Donbas insurgency tried to attack the Cabinet of Ministers building in Kyiv with a grenade, saying that ‘life had got to him’.¹⁰¹ Finally, the experience of war may drive veterans to suicide.



Screenshots from a police video in Kharkiv after the police stopped a drunken driver who threatened them with a grenade. The first image shows the police trying to gain control of the grenade in the driver's hand. In the second image, the police secure the grenade. Photo: Screenshot from Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/Bilosh/videos/2014272932307790/?ref=embed_video&t=5

The (slim) silver lining to this situation is that law enforcement agencies have been cognizant of the issue of returning veterans since 2014. According to an optimistic police source, they 'are ready for everything' and have set up special programmes to handle demobilized soldiers, including a veterans-specific subunit within the domestic violence unit and training for police officers to learn how to talk to veterans and handle issues.¹⁰² However, a prominent NGO veteran remarked that the police need to improve how they treat veterans,¹⁰³ and the courts do not take the mental condition of veterans into account when passing judgment.¹⁰⁴

The muscle: Private security and legalized violence

Arguably the most lucrative sphere for veterans may be in private security, where their skills and experience will make them sought-after employees, while others may set up their own businesses. These companies are legal in Ukraine, and for many veterans will offer a stable job. But the work of private security firms in Ukraine has in the past sometimes veered into grey areas, where muscle and 'protection' are used as means to compel a desired business outcome.

The rise of muscle as a business arbiter ('power business') was in part driven by the absence of any formal or effective state mechanism to handle private sector disagreements in the Soviet Union, dating back to the late 1980s, when such activity took place in the shadow economy, and early 1990s, when largely unregulated private sector growth outstripped the legal framework to govern it.¹⁰⁵ Many criminals established private security companies when these were legalized by the state in the 1990s, as did former members of the security services. Although these companies provided business-orientated services, the core offering remained the same: 'protection, contract enforcement, dispute settlement, debt recovery, information gathering, and sometimes organizational consultancy'.¹⁰⁶

Looking ahead, the private sector in Ukraine offers rich pickings for criminals looking to form private security companies. The expected influx of vast reconstruction funds in the future (barring the worst-case scenario of a Ukrainian defeat) offers a lucrative motivation for private security companies to create effective brands that can smooth the path for both national and multinational companies, 'solving problems' and ensuring a stable business environment. Construction's large building sites are prime areas for this, given how costly shutdowns can be. Private security companies may also practice corporate raiding, or the hostile takeover of another company's assets, either through intimidation or by slowly insinuating themselves into their client's management structure.

This, of course, is a grey area, in which the use of organized violence takes place under a legal umbrella. But organized violence is most often used in an outright illegal context, in the category we can call 'the entrepreneurs'.

The entrepreneurs: More guns, new gangsters

The most acute organized crime risk of a flawed, incomplete or ineffective DDR programme is the flow of former soldiers and war weapons into organized crime groups. Ukraine has both in abundance and, while only a fraction of each may end up in the underworld, the impact on society could be immense. For some veterans, organized crime may represent the best possible life after war, providing access to the money, status, violence, camaraderie and drugs they experienced during the war. The heightened predilection for risk-taking among veterans may also make a life of crime a perfect match.

Soldiers who keep shooting

War shapes those who fight in profound ways. One of the most distinctive features is the sense of camaraderie that develops between soldiers. This deep bond is forged through the harrowing experiences, the day-to-day life together and the fact that each soldier relies on his comrades to protect his life. As one veteran evocatively described it, 'You eat from the same plate with them, you drink from the same cup. You walk with them, under fire, all together.'¹⁰⁷

After such an experience, the return to civilian life may be anticlimactic. 'How do I go on with my life?' one veteran mused. 'Go to work, make ends meet? There is no excitement as such.'¹⁰⁸ Some soldiers may have become attuned to the high-adrenaline nature of combat and will search for the buzz in civilian life.

For organized crime groups, these soldiers will be a valuable recruiting pool for those wanting to hire assassins, muscle and rank-and-file members with a high tolerance and skill for lethal violence – repeating a path trod by Soviet veterans of the Afghan War, many of whom joined organized crime.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, a senior law enforcement source told us that some 'smart criminal groups are sending their guys to fight' at the front line to gain experience in small arms and explosives.¹¹⁰ This will potentially enable organized crime actors to deploy a much wider arsenal of weaponry in future, and with much more accuracy. Drone operatives may be particularly prized, given that drones can be a cross-purpose criminal tool, capable of carrying out surveillance, smuggling and assassination.¹¹¹ Already drones have been used in large-scale drug trafficking. In February 2024, a quadcopter shot down in the Volyn region was carrying a consignment of over 22.5 kilograms of hashish worth €300 000.¹¹²



Drones have already been used by criminals for smuggling. In February 2024, a drone carrying 22.5 kilograms of hashish was detected in Volyn, western Ukraine. Photo: State Border Guard Service of Ukraine (ВІДЕО) Понад 22 кілограми наркотиків на 13 млн грн. На Волині прикордонники приземлили дрон з гашишем, 11 February 2024, <https://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/news/%20video%20-ponad-22-kilogrami-narkotikiv-na-13-mln-grn-na-volini-prikordonniki-prizemlili-dron-z-gashishem/>

There is also the risk of veterans forming their own criminal groups, bringing military standards of organization, planning and tactics to bear – as again was seen in the Soviet Union after Afghanistan, where ‘some criminal groups were organized on the principle of combat brotherhoods’.¹¹³ In 2021, there was a notable case of ex-ATO personnel, working alongside serving law enforcement officers, engaging in extortion: if clients did not pay, their cars were set on fire.¹¹⁴ The GI-TOC has heard of one such group already operating in Dnipro, making moves on the turf of a criminal boss who left Ukraine to escape the war.

Should the conflict diminish in intensity or end, other fighters may remain formally under arms but begin to engage in criminal practices to compensate for the shortfall of war work. This was seen after the outbreak of the war in the Donbas in 2014: as the military began to assume greater responsibility for the fighting, some members of the volunteer battalions began engaging in blackmail, theft, smuggling and providing ‘protection’ for businesses.¹¹⁵

Whether the past is a reliable guide remains to be seen. On the one hand, the post-2014 period did not see a surge in veteran-related crime in unoccupied Ukraine.¹¹⁶ Our police source in Dnipro was sanguine about the prospect of veterans joining criminal groups, which he did not perceive as a big problem. While there will be more veterans involved in crime, he argued that this was merely a consequence of there being more veterans in the future – there was no inherent tendency to criminality among veterans in general. If you know the people, he said, you can control the process.¹¹⁷

But compared to 2014, the scale of the challenge and the damage to Ukrainian society is vastly greater. Far more people have passed through the army, and the fighting has been more sustained, intense and dynamic. In July 2022, the number of veterans of the Russia–Ukraine war was about 440 000; by 2023, the number had risen to over 1.2 million.¹¹⁸ The economy has suffered more, too. In this environment, the push and pull factors for veterans to join or form organized groups may be much stronger than in the 2014–2022 period.

Weapons: Tricky to lose, easy to find

All veterans interviewed for this report agreed that control over weapons in the military was generally strict, with the loss of one’s weapon a potential bar to demobilization. ‘It’s impossible in any way [to keep a weapon for yourself],’ said one veteran. ‘This is a weapon that is registered to you by number. [...] If you don’t give it back, you don’t get through, you don’t get a signature on the bypass sheet, and you’re stuck. It’s a criminal offence if you don’t find your Kalash. Even when you go to the toilet, you have to take it with you.’¹¹⁹ This was echoed by another veteran. ‘It’s a really big responsibility, a terrible crime and a very big problem for this guy [in charge of collecting weapons]. And he’s not going to let you go just like that if there is something missing.’¹²⁰

But many weapons have gone missing, with the number of lost and stolen weapons in Ukraine exceeding 600 000 by March 2024. According to Streamlit, which aggregates Ministry of Internal affairs data, the majority (almost 400 000) went missing before February 2022, and it is important to note that stolen weapons represent only a tiny fraction of these.¹²¹ Officials claim that all such weapons have also been logged by the relevant authorities to forestall claims of weapons diversion.¹²²

At present, it is impossible to assess the completeness and accuracy of the records. Weapons that have been stolen may be reported as lost, and some missing weapons may not be reported at all (for example, if a soldier who had accrued a stash of weapons is killed or seriously wounded). How and where these missing weapons resurface is also an open question – the fact that the authorities have logged them does not necessarily prevent them from becoming tools of criminals.

In any case, there is another, and much more serious, flow of weapons to the black market than those issued to Ukrainian soldiers: 'trophy' weapons, or Russian weapons abandoned on the battlefield. These are available in huge quantities in former front-line areas, especially in places where the Russians retreated after the initial phase of the invasion in Sumy, Chernihiv and Kyiv, and during the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. It is possible for anyone (civilians and soldiers) to visit such areas, collect the weapons and take them home. Some of these weapons have entered illegal circulation, but most are kept for personal protection (in case of Russian aggression) or stockpiled for later use, continuing a long-standing tradition of hiding guns since at least World War II. Given their provenance, these weapons are all but invisible to Ukrainian authorities without compliance on the part of the collector or active operations to uncover stashes.



Weapons, explosives and ammunition discovered in a garage in Kharkiv in August 2023 that had been stashed by a local who had collected them from the front line in the guise of a volunteer. Photo: National Police of Ukraine, *Завозили до Харкова зброю: правоохоронці викрили батька та двох його синів у зберіганні зброї та боєприпасів*, 11 July 2023, <https://hk.npu.gov.ua/news/zavozyly-do-kharkova-zbroiu-pravoohorontsi-vykryly-batka-ta-dvokh-ioho-syniv-u-zberihanni-zbroi-ta-boieprypasiv>

Interestingly, this profusion of weapons has not led to a dramatic increase in organized arms trafficking. In known instances where such weapons were sold, it was done opportunistically without the involvement or brokerage of organized crime. However, organized crime is a customer. Police operations in three regions of Ukraine in March 2024 led to the seizure of explosives, sniper weapons, large-calibre machine guns and Russian-made assault rifles intended for sale to underworld figures.¹²³ The sellers were not professional criminals, being a businessperson in one case and local residents in the other two.

As discussed in a 2024 GI-TOC report, how these weapons will intersect with organized crime is as yet unclear.¹²⁴ As one underworld source in Odesa remarked, criminals in Ukraine already have all the weapons they need – although it is doubtful that a serious criminal would pass up the opportunity to acquire more sophisticated weaponry if available at the right price, and Ukraine may see a general tooling-up among groups as they refresh and enhance their arsenals. One indication of this could be seen in the arsenal of an armed robbery group in Kharkiv, which included RPGs and a large number of assault rifles – a level of hardware that was especially noteworthy given that their operations targeted people's homes.¹²⁵



The arsenal of a gang of armed robbers who pretended to be law enforcement officers apprehended by the Security Service of Ukraine in September 2022 in Kharkiv. Photo: Security Service of Ukraine, СБУ знешкодила злочинне угруповання, яке під виглядом правоохоронців грабувало харків'ян, Telegram, 21 September 2022, <https://t.me/SBUkr/5141>

For the most part, organized crime in Ukraine prefers to conduct its business quietly – violence attracts unnecessary attention and unwanted disruption – but new opportunities, or the reconfiguration of old ones, will inevitably lead to violent competition among criminals. It will be essential to monitor trends in illicit markets and scrutinize the organized crime ecosystem for patterns of instability and disruption that could foreshadow episodes of violence.

A more subtle challenge will be how to deal with those weapons in civilian hands that are being kept for self-defence, given that this set of gun owners cannot be equated with arms traffickers.¹²⁶ In the eyes of the law, however, there is no distinction, meaning that these people are left with the impossible choice of giving up their illegal weapons and leaving themselves defenceless against Russian aggression, or keeping their weapons and risk being convicted as criminals.

This bind makes it all the more imperative for Kyiv to overhaul its legislation concerning weapons. Ukraine has already moved to deal with the issue of trophy weapons, including a requirement that all trophy weapons be declared or surrendered within 24 hours, and there are frequent checks near the front line, which is the source of such weapons. But, as several observers have stated, more needs to be done in the legislative sphere, including a dedicated law on weapons. Taking them out of circulation appears to be an impossible task – an amnesty will be of limited use, given the continued threat of Russia; a buy-back programme is not financially feasible, given the number of weapons; and seizures can only net so many.¹²⁷ Realistically, the best way to remove weapons from the public sphere will be an increased sense of security in the country that persuades people they no longer need their weapons – but this prospect is sadly not realistic in the near term. In the interim, many citizens will understandably look to guarantee their own security through acquired weaponry.¹²⁸

Gun control: make illegal guns legal?

Ukraine lacks a dedicated gun law. Internal Directive 622 (1998), issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, partially regulates civilian weapons, although this is contradicted by Article 92 of the Basic Law, which stipulates that property must be regulated by law.¹²⁹ Article 263 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code bans the unauthorized circulation of weapons, ammunition and explosives.

Citizens can legally obtain permits for hunting rifles and other more powerful arms that are advertised and sold as sports weapons, but the purchase of handguns is prohibited to all except law enforcement personnel. The only official pathway to obtaining handguns is 'award weapons' given to officials: a source that has reportedly been misused by many to buy handguns illegally.

After the full-scale invasion, a law authorizing civilians to possess weapons was hastily adopted, although citizens were forbidden from carrying weapons outside the areas of storage.¹³⁰ At the time of writing, a second draft of this law is in preparation, with 700+ proposed amendments, but with more restrictive criteria for owning weapons, especially handguns. Under this law, civilians could retain weapons for self-defence but must register them with the police and return them to the police 90 days after the end of martial law, although with some avenues to legalize ownership.¹³¹

As the conversation over gun control in the US and elsewhere demonstrates, this is an issue with many sides. Gun control is usually conceived as restricting the number of guns in civilian hands; paradoxically, legalizing weapons in Ukraine may be the only pragmatic way of bringing some kind of control to the millions of illegal guns in the country. It also recognizes the need for citizens to have a legal means of self-defence in the midst of war. That said, there must also be limits to the kinds of weaponry citizens can own. Grenades, rocket launchers, mortars and other forms of military weaponry cannot realistically be included under such legislation, and so seizures, amnesties and other forms of interdiction and supply denial will be necessary to take them off the market. ■



TOWARDS A POSITIVE VETERANS POLICY

Formulating and implementing a DDR process is no easy task in and of itself. Reforming an existing process across a massive state apparatus while fighting a war that is exacting heavy financial and military costs is an order of magnitude more challenging. Yet, as the above sections set out, an effective and equitable DDR framework is of fundamental importance not only in terms of limiting organized crime, but also for the health and vitality of Ukrainian society as a whole. In some ways, the example of the Balkans may prove instructive. In Croatia, powerful veteran organizations, high public esteem and a broad law guaranteeing (and delivering) a range of benefits have enabled veterans to be a success story. In Serbia, by contrast, the lack of such mechanisms has seen veterans alienated, disenfranchised and ignored.¹³²

This report identifies four areas of the process that, while complex and highly challenging, nonetheless offer good potential returns for the future of the country.

Joining up civil society, business and the state

- Civil society and business have been dynamic forces for good since the invasion.
- Harnessing their input and expertise is essential to an effective veterans policy.
- An integrated, whole-life veterans policy – from before enlistment to a veteran’s death – is essential for an effective DDR process.
- The experiences and needs of all veterans – men and women – must be included in any comprehensive policy, as well as the role of their families (and the impact the veteran’s experiences may have on these extended networks).

One of the few success stories in veteran affairs is the role played by civil society, which has consistently shown itself to be dynamic, innovative and light on its feet in anticipating and addressing the needs of veterans and their communities, providing legal, psychological and rehabilitative assistance, among others. Civil society in Ukraine also has extensive experience, with many organizations having been established after the outbreak of fighting in the Donbas in 2014. Since the full-scale invasion, these NGOs have been intensely active, from working with veterans with acute physiological and psychological needs to attempting to shape government policy.¹³³

In October 2023, a group of five veterans organizations – Veteran Hub, Pryneps, Opportunity Space, The Legal Hundred and VETERANKA – issued a major report offering expert recommendations for the conceptualization and formulation of policy for veterans and their families. The report (henceforth, the 2023 Veteran Hub Report) outlined a whole-life path for the veteran (Figure 3), from before entering the service to old age and death: a joined-up holistic approach that stands in stark contrast to the state’s patchwork of initiatives, outdated legislation and ad-hoc decrees. It also highlights the major drawbacks of the current state approach: namely paternalism, lack of security, little stimulation, institutional indifference at the community level, and lack of coordination and information exchange between grassroots providers.¹³⁴

In the reintegration sphere, the international development organization IREX has dramatically expanded its Ukraine Veteran Reintegration Program (supported by the US State Department), which aims to increase veterans’ access to employment and vocational training opportunities and psychosocial and physical rehabilitation services. It has also supported the Ministry for Veteran Affairs’ development of an e-registry of veterans.¹³⁵ IREX also supports an initiative that seeks to help veterans enter the cybersecurity sphere.¹³⁶

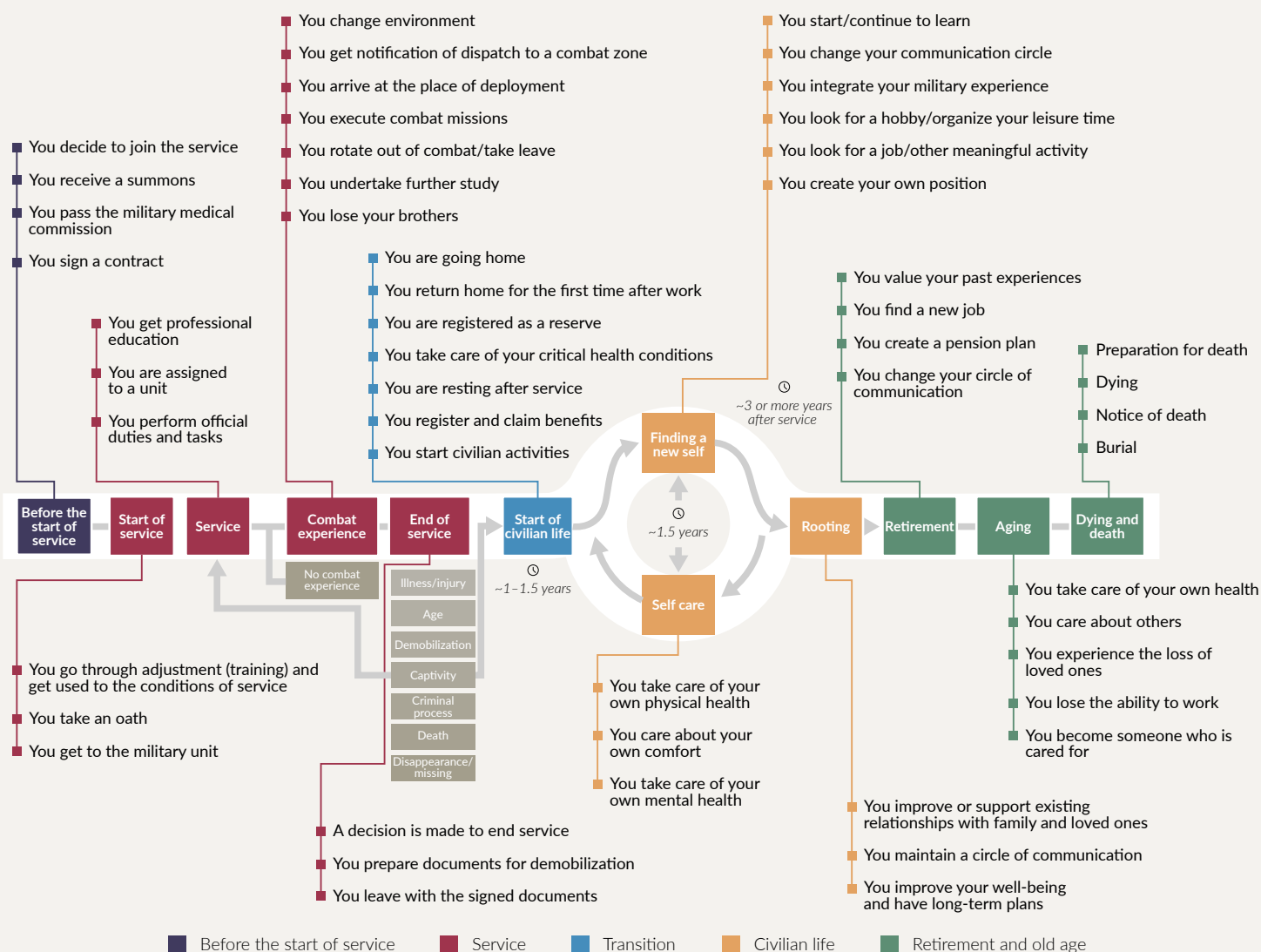


FIGURE 3 The whole-life pathway of the veteran, as mapped by the 2023 Veteran Hub report as part of its strategic policy recommendations for veterans and their families.

SOURCE: Adapted from the 2023 Veteran Hub Report

But the relationship between civil society and the state remains an uneasy one – according to one organization, the government was not entering into meaningful discourse with NGOs¹³⁷ – leaving NGOs to largely self-coordinate and organize. Coverage and duplication of effort is inevitably an issue with such a multi-pronged approach; as the October 2023 assessment by a group of NGOs concluded, ‘only the state can coordinate the efforts of Ukraine and its citizens’.¹³⁸ Therefore, the policy area with the most potential for transformative change may be to harness the dynamism of Ukrainian civil society within a functional state framework.

The business sector has also proved its dynamism in formulating policies to help veterans return to work, sometimes in coordination with veterans NGOs. Many businesses began to pioneer reintegration initiatives after 2014, and the process has only accelerated since then. Working with veterans on a case-by-case basis, many companies are now looking to create more systematic approaches to handle far greater numbers of veterans in the future. Importantly, they stress the need to provide support to an employee at the point of mobilization, not demobilization, as this helps to create a return pathway for the veteran.¹³⁹ Other companies have actively helped veterans return to the marketplace, such as the state savings bank Oschadbank offering a veteran loan programme to help veteran-interest companies, together with free business development programmes.¹⁴⁰ There is also strong coordination and mutual assistance among veteran-owned businesses.

There are good examples of cooperation between business and the state, notably the Association of ATO Veteran Entrepreneurs, established in 2016, which provides funding and education.¹⁴¹ The Ukrainian Veterans Foundation, managed by the Ministry for Veterans Affairs, also provides some effective coordination, support and funding for veteran businesses. At the same time, veterans feel that veteran businesses should not be integrated into civil businesses but the other way around. In order to do that, some outdated existing rules need to be changed. Ukrainian law, for instance, requires a person to begin work the very day after being demobilized; it is employers who are providing the additional leave that some veterans require.¹⁴² The large number of disabled veterans will also require closer coordination between business and government to provide the jobs and training required for them to re-enter the workforce.

Perhaps the most critical sphere for the collaboration of civil society, business and the state will be in the formulation of a new veterans law. Under Ukrainian law, people may propose an alternative draft law within 14 days of a draft law being submitted to parliament.¹⁴³ Civil society in Ukraine is already formulating its own wording for a veterans law for just such an eventuality, recognizing the need to specify only what the state can deliver and to avoid duplication of effort through the creation of new institutions.¹⁴⁴ A similar ‘shadow law’ should be prepared for the demobilization law to come, linking demobilization to reintegration efforts. Ultimately, it will be better to include such civil society partners in the formulation of the policy, rather than drafting the policy in isolation and waiting for opposing amendments, which creates an antagonistic dynamic and ignores the careful strategic thinking undertaken by civil society on the issue.¹⁴⁵

At present, civil society organizations are frustrated by the current state of communication with the state and the state’s frequent rejection of innovative approaches.¹⁴⁶ At heart, there is a lack of trust between state and civil society, with some organizations resigning themselves to working independently, while others believe that forming a political component may be the only way to ensure that their voices are heard.¹⁴⁷



There is an increasing number of women serving in the Ukrainian armed forces, and their experiences and needs must be considered and met in any future veterans' policy. © Oleh Arkhanhorodsky/Global Images Ukraine via Getty Images

It is also critical to ensure that female veterans' voices are heard and their needs incorporated into any veterans policy. As of March 2024, there were over 40 000 women serving in the Ukrainian army, more than 4 000 of whom have been involved in active fighting.¹⁴⁸ These military personnel will have faced additional hurdles joining the military and during service, which must be recognized. They may also have different needs and requirements as veterans, and face different types of challenges reintegrating into civilian society.

Process and information

- Critical need to pass a demobilization law as soon as possible to standardize soldiers' term of service and reduce paternalism/arbitrary decisions in the military.
- Improving access to information will reduce veteran stress and improve engagement with services.
- Digitization of soldiers' service records can expedite the demobilization process, reduce bureaucracy and help connect demobilization with reintegration.

Smoothing the path by which soldiers can re-enter civilian society after serving in the military is of critical importance. Every misstep, obfuscation and unfair dealing heightens the risk of frustration and alienation among veterans, with deleterious long-term consequences for society. From the day they enlist, soldiers should know the process by which they can demobilize and how to access the benefits that are due to them. This will require implemented changes in the legislative, bureaucratic and information spheres.

The research undertaken for this report also shows that changes within the army – in terms of both process and culture – are required for effective demobilization, including a shift from commander-led management to a more systematic approach.

In this respect, the passing of the April 2024 mobilization law – shorn as it was of provisions on demobilization – was a missed opportunity to create a whole-process framework for military personnel. Soldiers will be highly sceptical of official promises to deal with the issue of demobilization

within eight months of passing of the mobilization law,¹⁴⁹ and while the policy of retaining serving soldiers may make sense because of their battlefield experience, it also risks widening the social divide between those who serve and those who do not. After an audit of Ukraine's armed forces, army chief Oleksandr Syrskyi claimed that Ukraine would not need the half-million new soldiers as suggested in December 2023 (although his predecessor, Valery Zaluzhny, who was in charge at the time, denied that the army had formally requested this number),¹⁵⁰ stating that better rotation, not mass recruitment, would help avoid force exhaustion.¹⁵¹ But those who have already served for years in fierce fighting may be justified to think it is time for others to take the baton.

Protesters at a rally in Odesa demanding a demobilization deadline from government for those serving in the armed forces © Viacheslav Onyshchenko/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images



Digital record-keeping is also required to replace the mountain of paperwork that veterans commonly blame as a source of delay, confusion and wasted resources.¹⁵² The Ministry of Defence is due to launch an 'Army+' app in 2024 that should help to digitize the paperwork of everyday life as a soldier, as well as provide a knowledge base and self-development portal. However, a more comprehensive digital service is called for to encompass a soldier's active service and post-service life.¹⁵³

A digital passport of each soldier's service, including their combat service, payment history and (if applicable) record of injury would enable the appropriate forms to be issued in a timely fashion, thus allowing soldiers to claim the benefits due to them without recourse to lawyers, appeals or months of waiting. This digital passport could also feed into the military medical commissions and speed up assessments of a soldier's fitness to serve. After demobilization, it could then be integrated with the existing Diia app to facilitate preferential access to benefits on one platform, and to send push notifications about educational and employment opportunities specifically targeted at veterans.¹⁵⁴

The present approach is scattershot, with the onus on the veteran to go out and seek information, rather than be provided with it – and many are falling through the gap. In a February 2024 survey, for example, almost 68% of veteran respondents did not know about existing training programmes.¹⁵⁵ The Ministry for Veteran Affairs homepage is intended to consolidate advice but it is less user-friendly than the Diia app and self-help NGO websites and, at the time of writing, shows limited functionality and incomplete information. A Ministry for Veteran Affairs helpline launched in March 2024 promises to offer a one-stop shop for advice on psychological support and benefits but, again, hotlines may be less user-friendly than apps, particularly at periods of high demand. Our test of the service found it only provided more numbers to call.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, a state initiative to provide an assistant to each veteran to help them access services seems high-minded but difficult to implement.¹⁵⁷

Give veterans a stake – and an outlet

- The sense of social justice among veterans can be a transformative force for Ukrainian society.
- Veterans have a right to be involved in policy matters and state institutions that concern them.
- Economic, educational, business and work opportunities can utilize veterans' skills and support reintegration.
- Along with a needed law on gun ownership, legalizing private military companies may be a pragmatic outlet to reduce the risk of violent criminal entrepreneurs among veterans.
- Civilian attitudes towards veterans, including stigmatization, affect whether veterans feel supported and valued by society.

As mentioned above, veterans are inherently political, not because they have a clear ideological affiliation to any particular party (though they may) but because having served in the military creates, for the veteran, a reciprocal expectation of society. To fight on behalf of a society is to have a stake in that society, and veterans have a keen sense of fairness and justice.

Ignoring this quality not only risks fomenting social unrest, but also discards a powerful tool. Utilizing veterans' sense of social purpose in all levels of government will ensure they feel listened to and give them a stake in reshaping Ukrainian society. A senior law enforcement officer in Dnipro said that he believes veterans are the new political elite and that the government should not be afraid of embracing them as such. 'They have a lot to give,' the officer said. 'They are honest, organized and they can do more than the average person. [...] I am more than willing and happy to employ them in the police force.'¹⁵⁸ Hiring veterans would be especially appropriate in military-orientated institutions such as the Ministry of Defence, where the appointment of external political figures with no combat experience risks widening the wedge between politics and the army. Indeed, one NGO went so far as to say that, if soldiers on the front line do not agree with the outcome of the next election, there would be conflict.¹⁵⁹ Another said that the only way to secure positive results would be through a political purge that enabled veterans to be integrated into the system.¹⁶⁰

This inclusion is particularly important with the looming issue of benefits cuts in the face of the broader economic challenge Ukraine faces in the next few years. Incorporating veterans in this process so that they can explain and discuss it in their veteran networks would help build, if not automatic approval for the measure, then at least a pragmatic sense of acceptance. It may be that a consolidated package of benefits that the state can actually deliver will play better with a veteran audience than an ambitious programme that cannot be fully implemented. If veterans are frozen out and treated in a high-handed manner, however, the country could see a repeat of the protests in Ukraine in 2011 and 2021, when veteran benefits were cut.¹⁶¹

The sheer number of veterans also offers a generational opportunity for a redesigned economic policy that could better enable Ukraine to reshape and diversify its economy after the vicissitudes of war, when the industrial heartland in the east may remain under occupation for some time. Education and employment opportunities will be crucial, although private sector interests must also be dealt with. Indeed, veteran employment may still be connected with war aims, as exemplified by the recent initiative to train veterans as cybersecurity specialists.¹⁶² According to one prominent NGO, the IT sector will be the main employer of veterans after the war.¹⁶³

Many veterans will have had their own business before the war, and others will be keen to start one – 50% of them, according to a February 2024 survey.¹⁶⁴ There has been progress in supporting veterans in this regard, compared to the 2014–2022 period, notably the eRobota initiative launched in November 2022, which provides grants of up to UAH 1 million for entrepreneurs, with special provisions for veterans, although issues remain.¹⁶⁵ As one veteran who demobilized in 2016 and subsequently opened his own pizza business explained:

It's much better now, 100%, both in terms of grant programmes and loans. When I opened, there was 9% interest on loans. And yet there are still some issues, [for example] grantors demand that you take 500 000 hryvnias and hire 10 workers for five years. [...] I'm exaggerating, of course, but still... This is the main problem of all grantors, that they create requirements that do not meet the needs of the business itself, because they are created by people not from the business, but by government officials who have no idea what business is.¹⁶⁶

Creating workplaces of the future that can accommodate veterans will be essential. On a pragmatic level, adapted workplaces must become commonplace to help injured veterans return to work, as well as employers and employees who can create roles and environments for veterans to do their best work. Given the diversity of needs and skills, there will be no one-size-fits-all solution. One imaginative initiative in early 2024 saw the state-owned railway company hiring former military drone operators to protect railway infrastructure.¹⁶⁷ The state's Veteran Development Centres are a promising tool to help the transition to the workplace,¹⁶⁸ but a more joined-up approach could be a public–private partnership between the Ministry for Veterans Affairs and a professional recruitment and talent-development agency, as seen in the UK's Career Transition Partnership between the Ministry of Defence and ManpowerGroup.¹⁶⁹

Other veterans may not wish to enter the civilian job market. As this report has identified, there will be veterans who have become used to the adrenaline of army life. Without any other option, they might join or form organized crime groups. Diverting veterans from this path is the highest priority in regard to organized crime, and while solutions are not uncomplicated, they do exist. At present, private military companies (PMCs) are illegal in Ukraine, while private security companies are legal, but their employees may not carry weapons. A conversation should be had about whether PMCs should be legalized and, if so, under what conditions they might operate and be regulated (such as not being authorized to work in Ukraine). For Ukraine, the prospect of keeping men under military order who could be called upon in the event of future Russian aggression may also act as an insurance policy in the face of mass demobilization. This is not to argue that PMCs are the only or best solution, but it is one that deserves discussion. In this light, the April 2024 decision of the Ukrainian parliament to table a draft law on the potential legalization of PMCs (described as 'international defence companies') was a welcome move to raise the issue for public debate.¹⁷⁰ Remobilization could also be flagged as an option for those who cannot adapt back to civilian life.

That said, PMCs could drain the best fighting men from Ukraine and reduce the effectiveness of the Ukrainian army – a serious risk in the face of continued Russian aggression.¹⁷¹ PMCs also carry a diplomatic risk for Ukraine, as PMCs are never seen as purely 'private' companies, given that they are governed by the state in which they are registered.¹⁷²

A law on gun ownership will also bring greater transparency and control to the profusion of weapons in Ukraine and reduce the black market which veterans may, by virtue of their access to and/or experience with weapons, become involved in, either as sellers or buyers. It would also reduce the risks of weapons being used for various forms of organized crime. Although a criminal would likely

not use a registered weapon to commit a crime, mass registration will limit their options when it comes to acquiring weapons. And, as argued above, a law enabling legal ownership of weapons will simply acknowledge the fact of reduced security in wartime, when civilians will want weapons for self-protection. Treating these citizens as de-facto criminals or even arms traffickers also obscures the true nature of the risk of arms trafficking and organized crime.

Finally, it is necessary to help structure the conversation between veteran and civilian, to ensure that veterans feel supported and valued by society.¹⁷³ At present, there is still some stigma shown towards veterans, despite their service. One interviewed NGO member had overheard someone in Lviv commenting on a disabled veteran who had lost both legs: 'Why is this man standing there smoking? My child shouldn't have to see this.'¹⁷⁴

Challenging the stigma shown towards Ukraine's veterans is crucial for their reintegration, and the media, sports and cultural sectors can play a powerful role. © Yevhenii Vasyliev/ Global Images Ukraine via Getty Images



Overtuning this stigma and embracing Ukraine's veterans is essential to their reintegration, and here the media, sports and cultural sectors can play a powerful role. There are already many such examples, from the casting of a veteran who lost both legs as the romantic centre of Ukraine's 'The Bachelor' reality TV contest, to 'Game of Heroes', in which veterans with serious injuries compete in athletic contests.¹⁷⁵ Hiring creative firms and advertising agencies would also help create more compelling public messaging than that created by a state bureaucracy.¹⁷⁶ It is also essential to actively solicit civilians' honest opinions – and fears – about veterans as the best way to learn about the sources of stigmatization and address them accordingly.¹⁷⁷

The problem of help

- Train veterans to provide psychological assistance to veterans: shared experience grants legitimacy.
- Deeper and longer training is required for effective psychological support of civilian psychologists.
- If veterans do offend, create judicial pathways that consider their experience and offer help.
- Create a clear state policy for the provision of psychological support for veterans.
- Deep prevention measures – preventing the circumstances that lead veterans to fall into crime – can help reintegration, especially in the transitions of demobilization.

Understanding who needs help, what type of help they need and delivering that help is arguably the most complex set of issues in reintegration. This includes screening veterans for addiction issues and psychological trauma and addressing the consequences of physical injuries sustained in combat. The diagnosis and treatment of these debilitations is essential for veterans to reintegrate successfully into society.

The barriers here occur in two spheres: the personal and the institutional. On the personal level, veterans may seek to hide psychological and addiction issues from professionals and family members. With drugs, the reticence may be founded on shame, fear of social stigmatization, reluctance to admit that the user has a problem, or a simple wish to avoid being implicated in criminal activity. Finding a path back from addiction is highly challenging even among civilians, but special expertise is required in treating soldiers with addiction, given their intensely traumatic experiences. However, the benefits are manifold, not only in saving veterans from the destructive effects of drug use but also in reducing their proclivity for unpredictable behaviour, which, given the weapons factor in Ukraine, can slide into lethal violence, including suicide.

A related challenge is in overcoming some veterans' resistance to professional psychological help, especially for those without strong support networks. The topic of mental health is also largely taboo among soldiers, as one veteran explained:¹⁷⁸

He'd have to cross some kind of line in terms of talking to some therapist who's never been through what he's been through. It's hard for a military man to open up to a civilian, even a doctor. For him, [a doctor] is more of a dodger in a white coat who is trying to impose his own will or opinion on him. Not all the military realize that this help is really necessary.¹⁷⁹

Overcoming these barriers is essential, and innovative ways are being pioneered that harness the natural camaraderie and mutual understanding among veterans. Networks of veterans (often structured around former military units) have proved to be powerful tools of social cohesion and psychological support in other post-war contexts, including post-World War II Germany. In 2019, a Ukrainian initiative was launched that used a 'brother' – a fellow veteran – to talk with veterans about mental health as a way of overcoming the reluctance to talk to a psychologist.¹⁸⁰ The Baza app, developed by an NGO and released in 2023, offers psychological first aid for veterans, while the Prometheus platform provides training courses to employers and employees to help them navigate issues veterans may face, both of which are free for veterans.¹⁸¹ One veteran we spoke to had also set up an organization to help fellow veterans socialize and empower them to rebuild their lives:

It's a place where a military person can come and socialize with other military people just like him. [...] It is set up to say that, if you don't have a limb, it's not the end of life. You have to live, try to *be*, not to *seem*. [...] You can meet a girl. Yeah, you've got that stump. But you're interesting in your own right, and she'll see the fortitude and the willpower, and she'll be with you.¹⁸²

There have also been attempts to overcome the taboo against talking about mental health at the state level, including First Lady Olena Zelenska's 'How are you?' programme and a roadshow that received extensive input from international partners.¹⁸³ Given that distrust of psychological assistance is a cultural issue, it may be that culture also has a role to play through programmes, books and other media that do not simply preach on the issue, but seek to explore it from the veteran's point of view.

The second challenge is one of institutional direction, capacity and sequencing. Here the headlines may obscure more than they reveal. Although there has been a steep increase in the number of psychologists in the army since the full-scale invasion, the training they undergo is very different from that of a civilian psychologist, and much briefer (reportedly as little as three weeks).¹⁸⁴

According to one psychologist who went to serve in the army, the role is also entirely different – army psychologists are more like 'political officers', primarily concerned with a soldier's motivation rather than their mental health.¹⁸⁵ As one veteran said, their work seems more orientated towards 'sifting' than 'supporting', with little time and space given to psychological treatment, although reluctance

'They don't have the time. And there's too much traffic of people to interview them [properly].'

– A VETERAN, SPEAKING OF ARMY PSYCHOLOGISTS

among soldiers played its part, too. 'He was busy discharging alcoholics,' said the veteran. 'It just took up all his time. During lunch, the psychologist asked, "Does anyone need to talk to anyone?" No. Nobody cares. It was not the time for a psychologist.'¹⁸⁶

In many ways, the current system is understandably pragmatic. There is not a lot of time or inclination for emotional conversation in war, particularly at the front line. The army's current response recognizes that the best immediate course of action for a traumatized soldier is to remove them from the source of stress. There are three layers of fallback in the current model: in the first tier, the soldier is taken back from the immediate front line to rest; in the second, to a location 150–200 kilometres from the front, away from the noise of war; and the third, to sanatoria far from the front, where, according to one veteran, the traumatized soldier would usually be put to sleep for a period of rest.¹⁸⁷

The problem is one of timing: when should psychological assessment be prioritized? Arguably the demobilization process offers the best window of opportunity but, according to one veteran, the 15-minute psychological examination performed during the military medical commission was perfunctory: 'in a field like psychology, psychotherapy, it's nothing at all.'¹⁸⁸ Accessing help after demobilization was also described as challenging and only available to those who proactively sought it. 'I believe that you need to apply yourself,' said one veteran. 'If you apply, you will get some help. [But] I wasn't offered anything, I wasn't told anything.'¹⁸⁹ This situation is especially critical for injured soldiers, for whom psychological support is a crucial part of their long-term recovery. 'I believe that, when a person is injured, a psychologist is the first level of assistance after a surgeon,' said a veteran who had lost a leg in fighting near Bakhmut.¹⁹⁰

Another consideration is that of budgetary resources for veterans seeking civilian psychological support. There is a marked discrepancy between the allocation paid to psychologists by the National Health Service of Ukraine for psychological consultations and the market rate, which reflects the considerable investment in education and the costs of ongoing training and supervision to ensure the quality of the work.¹⁹¹

For all the efforts that have been made, helping Ukraine's veterans will require not only a significant increase in resources, but also a new approach supported by a new policy of psychological help.¹⁹² Psychologists need to be adequately trained and skilled to respond to the particulars of war-associated trauma and given a framework for when and where to deploy their expertise in a meaningful way.¹⁹³ Society as a whole will need to see psychological help as a benefit, not with suspicion, but this will require an overhaul of Ukraine's mental-health infrastructure, which remains largely shaped by Soviet-era thinking, underfunded (especially in outpatient care) and plagued by corruption.¹⁹⁴

Another access point for help may be when a veteran has been apprehended for a crime. Much will depend on the severity of the offence, but veterans who commit light- or medium-level crimes might be treated through a special court mechanism similar to the programme for juvenile offenders, with specialized experts, social workers and psychological help. In this model, a tribunal would seek to understand the veteran's experience and suggest a programme of rehabilitation or treatment rather than a criminal sentence. Once the programme is completed, the offender would be released without

further charge. Even so, a balance must also be struck to not imply that veterans have blanket immunity from sentencing, which could be taken advantage of by some offenders who have served.

Ultimately, help will be most effective when directed at the contexts in which veterans live. This 'deep prevention,' should seek to prevent the occurrence of the circumstances that lead veterans to fall into crime. In this framing, vulnerability is created not by the veteran being a veteran per se, but by the rapid changing of circumstances from long military service to civilian life. This is especially true given that veterans are legally expected to return to work the day after demobilization. A period of relaxation built into the demobilization process could help veterans prepare themselves for the next phase of life.

Data: Putting risks in perspective

- Data can quantify risk and dispel stigma.
- Timely data can help the state tailor responses.

In the years to come, data will be one of the most powerful tools to inform and improve DDR in Ukraine. On the one hand, good data will give a solid evidence base for the trajectories of veterans, including their involvement in crime. On the other hand, data can also help to dispel stigmatization by clearly denoting the real extent of veteran vulnerabilities, including criminal offending, addiction rates, suicide and employment issues.

The US pioneered this approach in its assessment of Vietnam veterans. Although the data has been subject to various interpretations, it appears to suggest that, after a difficult initial period in which mass demobilization coincided with a downturn in the US economy, in most cases the 'Vietnam myth' of a forgotten generation was exaggerated. Many veterans did return with addiction and trauma, but there was also a wide uptake of the GI Bill, for example, and an increase in benefits.¹⁹⁵ The main exception to these outcomes was among veterans with severe injuries. According to a November 1987 survey, the 92% employment rate for non-severely injured Vietnam veterans was about the same as their non-veteran counterparts, but the rate fell to 34% for severely disabled veterans.¹⁹⁶ Building data-collection capacity will therefore enable the state to see the true trends and tailor help to those sectors of the veteran population where it is most needed.

Amendments to veterans policy specifically related to organized crime risks

- Draft amendments can be introduced into the parliamentary debate on a new state veterans policy.

The 2023 Veteran Hub Report has designed an impressive flow chart of the stages of the veteran's experience, creating a strategic structure for the provision of help (see Figure 3). Yet the risks of veterans engaging in crime are not made explicit in this vision, and this should be remedied. Although this is a worst-case scenario, it must be planned and provisioned for. Given the process of debate for the formulation of draft laws in the Ukrainian parliament, it may be prudent to draft amendments specifically relating to the organized crime risks faced by veterans, as outlined in this report, that could be suggested and potentially adopted in new veterans policy and law. The wording of such amendments will require close collaboration with veterans groups and sensitive language to avoid stigmatization of veterans. Such amendments may also include a data-collection capacity to monitor such risks.



CONCLUSION

Veterans will be at the heart of Ukraine's future as a country. Not only will they represent a significant proportion of the population, but their skills, sense of justice and motivation will also be essential to reboot civilian life after martial law comes to an end. The social contract between the state and veterans must be reformed to ensure veterans are given the support they need and the respect they deserve. Amid a raft of competing priorities and demands, the risk of organized crime may appear relatively slight. But, as this report has highlighted, the nature of such risks is complex and layered.

If the social contract between state and veteran is not robust and honest, veterans will feel alienated from the political structures they have fought to support, which will affect social cohesion: one of the best preventatives of crime. At the individual level, the trauma of war and the propensity for substance abuse among some soldiers may carry over into civilian life, potentially fuelling the illicit drug trade and violent crime. Organized crime may directly offer veterans a sense of brotherhood, elevated earnings and use of their military skills. Less directly, the use of veterans as muscle by private security companies could contribute to an increase in 'power business', where physical force becomes a shaping influence in the business space.

It must be emphasized that these outcomes are not restricted to veterans, and neither will veterans necessarily show more proclivity than other sections of society to engage in criminal activity. It is therefore essential to avoid stigmatizing veterans as somehow predisposed to criminal activity, while also recognizing the intense and unique nature of their experience. For this reason, this report has used a DDR framework to map the risks along the soldier's journey back to civilian life, but a coalition of civil society in Ukraine has also developed a strategic roadmap where these risks can be located.

Ultimately, Ukraine's military personnel offer a double source of strength, both in defending the country against Russian aggression and in contributing to rebuilding it as veterans. The majority of veterans do not want a special status or dispensation, only the opportunity to work and make a life for themselves after serving. The history of past mass demobilizations, especially the First and Second World Wars, highlights how daunting these modest goals are to achieve in societies at war, or after the war has ended, when economies are under strain. Planning now, rather than in the midst of a mass demobilization, will greatly increase the chance of positive outcomes.



NOTES

- 1 At present, Ukraine lacks a dedicated gun law, and civilian ownership and use of weapons are currently authorized only for the period of martial law plus 90 days.
- 2 Interviews with NGOs, Ukraine, April 2024.
- 3 Samya Kullab and Illia Novikov, Ukraine's parliament passes a controversial law to boost much-needed conscripts as war drags on, AP News, 11 April 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-parliament-recruit-army-russia-war-5b7d9f58bb398b4ad1296311b8130b92>.
- 4 Vira Shurmakevich, Понад 90% українців довіряють ветеранам АТО та ЗСУ, Ukraine Pravda, 13 March 2024, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/yakiy-riven-doviri-ukrajinciv-do-viyskovih-ta-veteraniv-viyni-opituvannya-300502/>.
- 5 Arion McNicol, How many Ukrainians have died in the war against Russia?, The Week, 31 January 2024, <https://theweek.com/news/world-news/russia/958320/the-real-ukraine-war-death-toll>.
- 6 Michael Kofman and Ryan Evans, Fortifications, manpower and munitions in Ukraine's daunting year ahead, War on the Rocks, 18 March 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/03/fortifications-manpower-and-munitions-in-ukraines-daunting-year-ahead/>.
- 7 Discussion with civil society stakeholders, Lviv, April 2024. See also Stephanie Hanson, Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) in Africa, Council on Foreign Relations, 15 February 2007, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/disarmament-demobilization-and-reintegration-ddr-africa>.
- 8 See UN Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, IDDRS 6.40: DDR and organized crime, 5 February 2021, <https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IDDRS-6.40-DDR-and-Organized-Crime.pdf>.
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