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POLICY BRIEF: MARCH 2019

What's next for veterans in Ukraine?

Promoting inclusion to improve the reintegration architecture for former combatants

SUMMARY

Based on findings from research in Ukrainian government-controlled areas, this policy brief explores the role of gender norms, norms of masculinity and femininity, in shaping reintegration experiences of female and male former combatants – professional soldiers, conscripts and volunteers – who fought in Eastern Ukraine between 2014 and 2017. It shows how gender expectations, norms and roles significantly influence reintegration challenges and opportunities for female and male former combatants and those with disabilities. Building on these findings, the brief advocates for inclusive and gender-sensitive analyses, policies and initiatives aimed at facilitating the transition of all female and male former combatants back to civilian life. It specifically highlights three priorities targeted at Ukrainian state institutions working with former combatants as well as international donors and bilateral partners working for stability in Ukraine: factor in individual needs and challenges of female and male veterans, and female and male veterans with disabilities, while developing the new centralised veterans' support system; enhance national capacities and technical expertise necessary to implement and strengthen this system; and recognise and support the complementary role played by NGOs, businesses and broader veterans' networks in providing vital services to veterans.

Introduction

This policy brief explores how gender expectations significantly influence reintegration challenges and opportunities for female and male former combatants, including those with disabilities. It focuses on professional soldiers, conscripts and volunteers who fought in Eastern Ukraine between 2014 and 2017 and left the armed forces after being demobilised or injured. The brief advocates for coherent and holistic, gender-sensitive and inclusive policies and initiatives to facilitate a more effective transition back to civilian life.

As the first armed conflict¹ on Ukrainian territory since the mid-20th century,² the war in Donbas mobilised a highly heterogeneous population of approximately 350,000 Ukrainian men and women (around 1% of the Ukrainian population) – including professional soldiers already engaged with the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), as well as conscripts and volunteers, some of whom were integrated into the UAF and the National Guard in 2015 after joining the so-called Volunteer Battalions.³ Statistics are not readily available, but, according to estimates, more than 7,000 UAF servicewomen have served in the Donbas,⁴ and roughly 30–35% of the 40,000 volunteers were women.⁵

Following multiple waves of demobilisation of military personnel, Ukraine has recently embarked on a journey to improve its reintegration systems and processes. A gender-sensitive analysis of Donbas veterans⁶ experiences after demobilising and their needs is critical to inform the development of the emerging and future reintegration policies and programming in Ukraine.

While fundamental studies have been published on masculinities in Ukraine,⁷ on assessing gender mainstreaming in ongoing defence and security reform,⁸ and specifically on female combatants' experiences on the frontline,⁹ systematic and up-to-date information on the reintegration challenges and opportunities for women and men who fought in the Donbas is lacking.

This policy brief draws on the findings of a UK Aid-funded qualitative study designed to understand the role that gender roles and norms have played in Ukraine in shaping combatants' perceptions and experiences while joining the armed forces and/or Volunteer Battalions, both during their service¹⁰ and after leaving the armed forces. For this research, International Alert (Alert) with two teams of local and international consultants carried out a total of 111 key informant interviews (KIIs) with 50 male and 10 female

former soldiers who participated in active combat in the Eastern parts of the country in 2014–2015, 29 legal and psycho-social service providers, including 14 men and 15 women, 15 female family members and seven government officials in Kyiv, Mariupol and Dnipro, Lviv and Kharkiv. Around a third of the former combatants interviewed had joined voluntarily, a third were conscripted and a third had initially joined Volunteer Battalions (before being integrated into the UAF or demobilised). Following the data collection, Alert's team consulted with diverse national and international implementing agencies and organisations to validate the research findings and further understand the existing reintegration architecture.

The reintegration architecture, a fragmented system in transition

The state-led formal reintegration architecture

Six waves of mobilisation and demobilisation of military personnel between 2014 and 2016¹¹ have put additional pressure on an already strained reintegration system for veterans.¹² Not only is the system chronically underfunded and marred by corruption and cumbersome bureaucratic processes,¹³ but it is also rooted in a highly fragmented reintegration policy architecture. At least 33 committees in 20 ministries at the national level are overseeing the implementation of over 30 policies on reintegration. The government of Ukraine has also been implementing the National Action Plan (2016–2020) on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325,¹⁴ which acknowledges the need to provide rehabilitation and reintegration for female ex-combatants and their families.¹⁵ However, it is not clear how coordinated this plan is with national policies.

The absence of a solid coherent policy on reintegration has at least three implications: one, it prevents the formulation of a definition of what constitutes a successful reintegration, which has implications in terms of design, accountability and measurement. Two, former combatants themselves and administrations in charge of implementing reintegration-related policies do not have a shared common understanding of who is responsible for what and seem to compete instead of collaborate in a tight-funding environment, thereby widening the gap between policy and practice and overlooking the diversity among former combatants. Three,

reintegration policies tend to be disconnected from broader national policies, for instance on people with disabilities¹⁶ or towards gender equality, rather than seeking synergies, thereby leading to sub-standard services and/or missing out on opportunities for achieving national goals on those issues.

The supplementing role of civil society and international partners

A number of initiatives implemented by national and international stakeholders have been supplementing the formal reintegration system. These include a plethora of formal and informal initiatives carried out by national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and non-profits, such as the recently set-up Veteran Hub composed of eight organisations.¹⁷ While these stakeholders aim to bridge the gap between policy and practice emerging from the fragmented state-led reintegration architecture, programmes are not systematically coordinated and risks of duplication are high. In some regions, they also tend to intertwine with local and/or national politics, with organisations' heads and members running for office under political party banners or elected deputies establishing their own organisations.¹⁸

International and intergovernmental agencies have also implemented initiatives aimed at supporting the Ukrainian state or services personnel directly, including both long-term initiatives for service personnel and more recent initiatives focusing specifically on veterans from the war in Donbas, as well as former service personnel more broadly. These include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Liaison Office and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), among others, as well as bilateral funding partners. Yet, similarly to national initiatives, these efforts often lack joint coordination.

Towards a more integrated, but non-inclusive, system

With the aim of remedying these challenges and fostering coherence at the national level, a Ministry for Veterans' Affairs was established in November 2018. The priorities of the Ministry are being informed by a White Book containing a list of recommendations gleaned from consultations with national NGOs involved in the legal and psycho-social support of former combatants.

Although the establishment of this Ministry is a step in the right direction, at this stage, it is still unclear whether the Ministry's priorities, mandate and resources will enable it to meet fully the needs of veterans. The list of

recommendations does not promote gender sensitivity or an inclusive approach to former combatants' diverse needs. Therefore, while policy discussions in Ukraine have moved forward with considering former combatants' challenges to accessing state benefits and identifying a more coherent and adequate support, they ignore veterans' diversity and the role of gender norms in shaping reintegration experiences.

Reintegration challenges of the Donbas veterans as reported by interviewed female and male former combatants

The following section applies an inclusion and gender lens to the primary research to draw a more accurate picture of the concrete implications of the limitations of the reintegration architecture for female and male former combatants.

Applying an inclusion and gender lens means:

- Acknowledging former combatants' diversity in terms of gender, whether they have disabilities, and other identity markers such as age, area of origin and level of education.
- Identifying and understanding how gendered and other identity-based obstacles influence former combatants' reintegration challenges and opportunities and exclude individuals or groups from full participation in and benefits from the reintegration system.
- Acting upon and addressing these obstacles.

Concretely, Alert's research applied an inclusion and gender lens by selecting a diverse sample of former combatants – including women, men, and women and men with disabilities – and female and male service providers, and disaggregating data according to these identity markers during the analysis stage in order to highlight research participants' different reintegration experiences, thereby revealing the way the reintegration system is significantly shaped by gender norms and expectations.

A dysfunctional benefit system that fuels a sense of marginalisation among former combatants and former members of Volunteer Battalions

Alert's research has shown that former combatants' economic and financial situation tended to be worse than before they served in the Donbas.¹⁹ Unemployment, absence of savings, debts and financial pressure on the relatives who stayed behind were identified by those interviewed as key challenges.

While a strained economic situation is not unique to households with former combatants,²⁰ the fact that joining the UAF degraded their economic situation contributes to fuelling their resentment towards the state. All the more so since at least a third of former combatants interviewed experienced challenges, or knew about former combatants who experienced challenges, in receiving specific benefits and status, such as the Combat Veteran Status (CVS), which they perceive as the lack of a symbolic recognition by the state of their sacrifices.

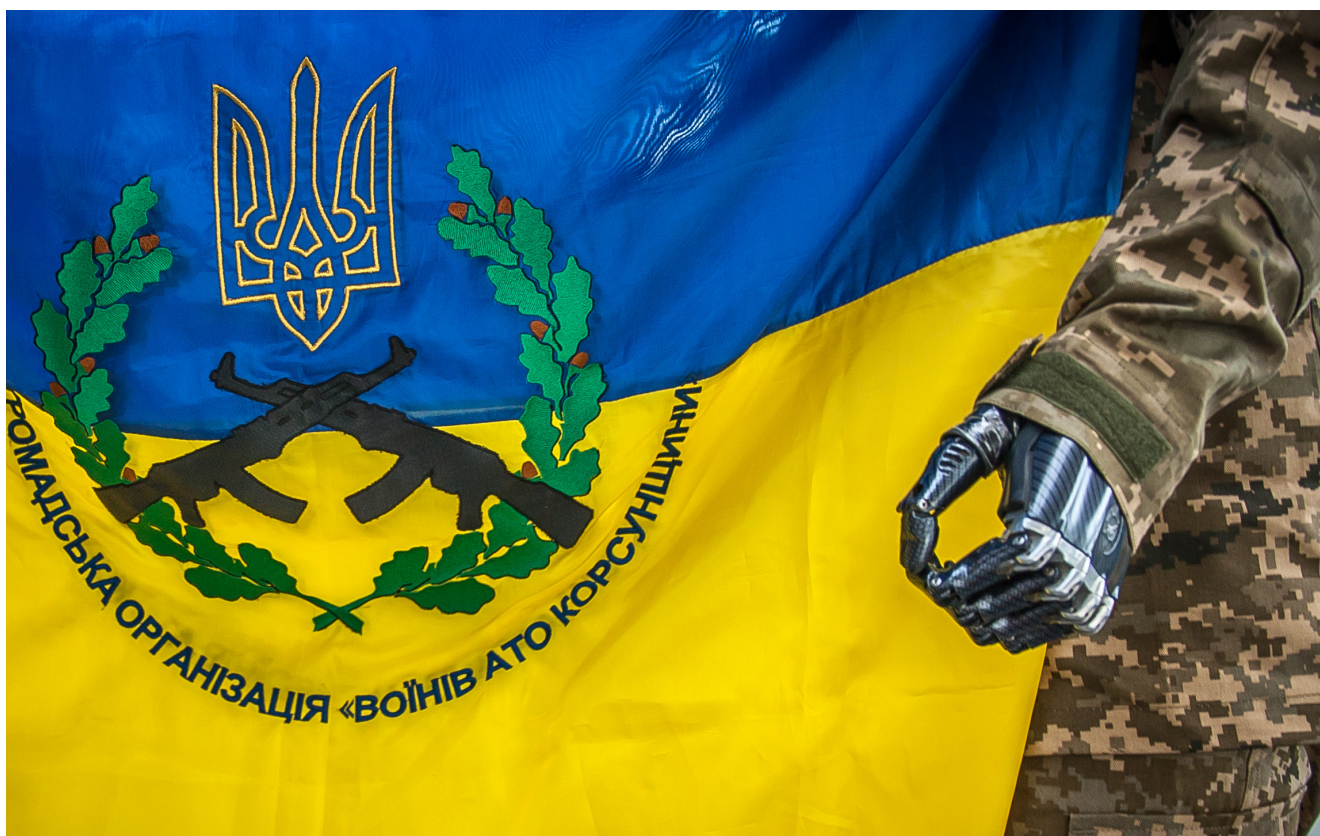
Challenges in receiving the CVS were twofold depending on the former combatants' background. On the one hand, among former service personnel, many had been granted the CVS but were actually not receiving the benefits to

which they were entitled. On the other hand, interviewees who served in Volunteer Battalions, particularly those who served in battalions not formally integrated within the Ministries of Defence or Internal Affairs, or those who were not officially registered for their service, were not even recognised as veterans.

These problems inherent in the benefit system have tended to fuel former combatants' sense of marginalisation and frustration, thereby further widening the gap between former combatants and the state. As one veteran stated, the sentiment is rife among former combatants that "nothing has changed [back home]", while they had sacrificed, or had been prepared to sacrifice, all that they had. According to another male former combatant, "Not a single benefit works for veterans, except for free public transport. [...] We have a Swiss social legislation, and the economic situation is as in Zimbabwe. We want to give you so much for free, but we have only 300 USD."

Gendered legal and socio-economic reintegration challenges tend to disproportionately impact female former combatants

These challenges are exacerbated for female former combatants due to dominant gender stereotypes. Female



Disabled war veteran with prosthetic hand at the Borispol airport, in Kiev, Ukraine © Shutterstock 2017

respondents explained that their military service is often questioned, discounted or not recognised – a dynamic also seen in other current and historical contexts, including the participation of Soviet women in the Second World War. For example, a bus driver insinuated that one of the female respondents had earned benefits in exchange for sex and not because of her deployment in the Donbas. Even male veterans tended to reiterate these gender stereotypes. They questioned the motivations of their female colleagues, by suggesting that “they enrolled to find a husband” or describing them as “unmarriageable” after wearing a uniform. The fact that female combatants’ roles and experiences are underreported and are predominantly constrained to a certain category of jobs and positions in line with traditional gender norms and expectations, such as caring or administrative work, contributes to these discriminations. Following the 2016 National Action Plan on the UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and the release of the Invisible Battalions²¹ research, the Ministry of Defence extended the list of military positions available for women. And yet women in the UAF are still for the majority affected in service and medical roles, showing the persistence of deeply rooted discriminatory gendered norms and expectations. Our findings also revealed that, when some female combatants did take up combat-related positions, they were rarely officially recognised in these roles during and after their service.

Interestingly, some male veterans expressed reluctance to claim social benefits, which they see as humiliating and disempowering – as it would potentially question their identity as active members of the society, as citizens or as men. As one respondent put it, “I never rely on the country. In all this time I have not received any support as a veteran. For example, in Kyiv, [former combatants receive] 1000 Hryvnas per year. But I think that as a person who is not starving, I would feel ashamed to take from the government.”

Former combatants with disabilities: the untold story

It is estimated that at least 5,500 former combatants are now disabled.²² Out of the 60 former combatants interviewed, at least six suffered from injuries causing long-term/lifelong physical impairments. In tracing back the reintegration paths of these six former combatants, it became clear that they had also been disproportionately impacted by the socio-economic and legal challenges that have tended to mar reintegration processes for veterans from the war in Donbas. Former combatants who sustained injuries on the frontline had often been transferred to military hospitals located far from their home areas. They had thus been isolated from

their families, and their basic needs were often not met in (already under-resourced) care facilities increasingly overwhelmed by an upsurge in the conflict in 2014–2015. In addition, unemployment and other financial challenges were exacerbated by the fact that Ukraine is insufficiently equipped with infrastructure adapted to people with disabilities.²³ Therefore, while former combatants with disabilities are depicted as heroes who courageously defended the nation, in practice they are often isolated from their relatives, friends and society more broadly. One interviewed former combatant, who is now in a wheelchair, recounted, “Well, I did not return home actually. [...] Because my wife, my family and I, we lived in my wife’s parents’ place, on the 5th floor without an elevator. [...] The family fell apart after my wife died, and the children... the eldest son grew up, and he has other priorities, the youngest one lives with my mother-in-law [...] I see him, we talk for half an hour, an hour or so, and I leave, because it is hard to commute frequently.”

For both female and male former combatants, injuries and impairments may prevent them from meeting gendered societal expectations and gender roles. Male former combatants described a loss of social status and role in the family, while female former combatants with disabilities tended to be ‘masculinised’, including by service providers, for being “as courageous as men” or for no longer being feminine. One male service provider explained that “those women who became disabled after the war, they were so courageous, sometimes they reminded me of men, that I saw, well, if you compare a woman who lost their hand or leg to a man, then in reality, let’s say, in psychological terms they look the same like... this woman who has lost her legs, she looks so brave like a man, that is, she has such features. I do not know if it is the way they [women] display a courage, or they are just so very strong.”

Gender norms and expectations as an obstacle to mental recovery

While few research participants disclosed personal mental health issues, the majority of them described issues such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol abuse as widespread challenges to reintegration and as stigmatising labels. Mental health issues were in fact the most discussed topic when considering the challenges of reintegration.

In a highly masculine environment, where being a man and displaying weakness are incompatible, openly seeking help can be seen as shameful. The description of veterans as ‘heroes’ does not leave room for non-heroic problems. Besides, the celebration of ‘success stories’, former combatants who have transitioned back to civilian life

without facing any major hurdles, puts an additional pressure and sense of failure on men who struggle and no longer feel like 'men', especially as they are already in the process of shifting from the manly identity of 'fighter' and 'gun-bearer' to the more gender-neutral (but implicitly feminised and seen as more passive) identity of civilian. This sense of failure is exacerbated by the limited access to quality psycho-social support in Ukraine, where mental illnesses tend to be stigmatised and care structures (civilian and military) are under-capacitated.

The former combatants interviewed did not trust civilian psychologists whom they deemed under-qualified and not understanding of their concerns, due to their not having been at the front. A vast majority of service providers interviewed seemed to work with preconceived ideas about former combatants' impairments. For instance, service providers tended to explain former combatants' issues based on their background and identity – where they are from, whether they are a man or a woman, their socio-economic status – rather than understanding former combatants' issues as the result of their experiences on the frontline. Some service providers recognised the lack of capacities in their services and identified the lack of support from the state. Yet, they did not seem to be cognisant of other initiatives aimed at providing psycho-social support for former combatants and implemented in their own cities, and therefore were unable to set up alternative referral processes for their patients. Furthermore, service providers working with former combatants tended to replicate highly gendered stereotypes on female and male combatants. Some service providers saw former combatants as 'men' only; others explained that there was something 'wrong' with women who had chosen to transgress gender norms by joining the armed forces or the Volunteer Battalions. Female veterans said that as women they are expected to cope with their feelings more easily than men. Military psychologists also expressed gender stereotypes, such as this female respondent explaining that *"statistically, far fewer women were experiencing PTSD from their service than men. This is due to women being more in touch with their emotions and therefore more resilient to the stress factors to which they were exposed during the conflict."* Another female service provider similarly stated that *"For soldiers, it is very hard for them to ask for psychological help, they are macho, they are all warriors. And to admit that something is wrong with their psyche, it is hard in general, but it is harder for a man."* Therefore, speaking about their trauma is deemed socially unacceptable and not a necessity for women, while men, considered unable to express their feelings, have often internalised these expectations.

Gender stereotypes also affected female service providers who were seen by service providers themselves (female and male) as more able to listen and engage with 'wounded minds' than their male counterparts were, as well as wives and female partners of former combatants, who were expected to identify early on mental health problems and provide (unpaid) care work.

Gender norms and societal expectations therefore had a negative and heavy impact on female and male combatants' ability to cope and the systems and frameworks in place for them. Overall, stigmatisation of mental health issues remains a significant barrier for soldiers to ask for professional help. This stigmatisation is reinforced by the lack of a comprehensive and systematic approach to psycho-social support, the lack of capacities among service providers, and the lack of clear procedures and understanding of what the regulations are and how to access the services. This is even more problematic as combat-related mental health issues tend to coincide with unemployment, strained relationships within the former combatants' inner circle, sometimes translated into domestic violence and substance abuse, thereby showing the cumulative impact of reintegration challenges.

Implications for social cohesion and stability

From a peacebuilding perspective, these challenges reported by female and male former combatants have the potential to weaken the social fabric and social cohesion, and further exacerbate social, political and economic tensions, with longer-term implications for peace and stability in the country.

Most of the former combatants interviewed, understandably, mentioned that they expected state benefits they are owed as they symbolise the state's recognition of their sacrifices. Former combatants thus expressed a sense of entitlement and consequently a feeling of neglect, anger and disappointment when faced with a complex system that seems to be ignorant of their diverse needs and experiences. As one respondent put it, *"Most of the servicemen who returned from the East, who were demobilised, rightly believe they have fulfilled their duty as citizens [...] the main problem is not that they did not get a land [...] but that they are rudely treated and not respected."* Former combatants' reintegration processes entail the reconfiguration of the relationship with the state and society, which is of paramount importance for the stability of Ukraine. When such relationships are broken, the risk is high that former combatants may feel marginalised, excluded, disenfranchised and politically dissatisfied – feelings and

perceptions that have contributed to fuelling tensions and violence in the first place and may prevent society from being resilient to drivers of conflict in the future.

A section of the sample of respondents may potentially join violent groups. Indeed, other research recently carried out by Alert in Ukraine²⁴ has shed light on the involvement of some former combatants in private security groups, which are linked with ultra-right or criminal groups. For instance, in Kherson oblast, where disputes over land and property are often solved with the use of force, security guard companies and paramilitary groups composed of former combatants have become increasingly active in this 'security market', after failing to position themselves in the legal security market. This is "a direct result of the poor quality and ineffectiveness of reintegration programmes" in that region.²⁵

From a gender perspective, these reintegration challenges make it difficult for women and men to meet gendered societal expectations and roles traditionally allocated to women and men in Ukrainian society. This may lead to further marginalisation and (self-)exclusion of former combatants. For some male former combatants, the fact of not meeting norms of masculinity and societal expectations may lead to increased frustrations, anger and hostility, which might be expressed in the domestic sphere or in the public space. This is not to say that all former combatants would be prone to violence, but rather that this may be a dynamic for some.

Opportunities for reintegration identified by former combatants

While reintegration processes are hindered by a large spectrum of – gendered – obstacles, research participants shed light on effective initiatives aimed at overcoming these challenges and accompanying the reintegration of former combatants who served in the Donbas.

The research specifically highlighted the positive role of organic **support networks among the veterans' community aiming to supplement the government assistance programmes with entrepreneurial and in-group services**, such as NGOs but also veteran-owned businesses and agricultural cooperatives exclusively hiring veterans. Former combatants interviewed explained that veterans' networks were necessary for the positive transition back to civilian life as they provided a unique space for exchange with other veterans and for offering solutions to their multiple needs. As one male former

combatant speaking about a veteran-owned restaurant chain explained: *"It was [the owner of the brand's]. He is also a veteran of this war. In general, the idea was to create job positions for ATO-ers, a place for ATO-ers to gather. Most of my employees are ATO-ers, who similarly to me could not find themselves after demobilisation. We are comfortable working with each other. I am not comfortable working and even communicating with people who do not understand [what the war is] and have not been to the war. This is a different perspective on life. We, the veterans of this war, have our specific problems, our own understanding of what is happening."*

Research participants also specifically mentioned a range of voluntary initiatives aimed at providing specialised military psychological assistance. The majority of combatants said that they feel more comfortable sharing their psychological challenges with fellow soldiers. They also mentioned finding support among civil activists who provided humanitarian aid on the frontline as well as chaplains (in particular respondents from the western region of Lviv). The main drawback of these networks is that they rely mostly on word of mouth and, therefore, may not be accessible to former combatants who are already isolated or unaware of such initiatives.²⁶

Conclusions and recommendations

The research shows that applying an inclusion and gender lens to studying people's experiences helps grasp a more nuanced and precise picture of their needs, perceptions, challenges and opportunities. In the case of Ukraine, it helps us understand the real day-to-day challenges experienced by a population as diverse as the combatants who served in the Donbas, thereby informing more effective and sustainable policies and programmes. The research findings essentially call for a holistic and inclusive approach that learns from what has been working so far, and develops and strengthens the system needed in a context-specific and gender-sensitive way.

It is critical to shift from approaching former combatants as disempowered and passive individuals to seeing them as empowered and resourceful diverse people. It is therefore essential to explore former combatants' reintegration pathways from their own perspectives, clear of external misconceptions and prejudices.

This means that the Ukrainian government will need to put an end to a siloed and fragmented reintegration system by **transforming the multiple reintegration policies and processes into a unique integrated and synergetic**

system. Strengthening the reintegration system should be embedded as a long-term priority across successive Ukrainian governments. This can contribute to bringing clarity and fostering coherence and collaboration between services where the mandates collide, thereby promoting cost effectiveness and transparency, and avoiding inflated expectations that can contribute to undermining further the relationship between former combatants and the state.

Alert's research findings show that this system transformation should be structured around three main priorities:

- 1. Individual needs and challenges of female and male veterans, and female and male veterans with disabilities need to be factored into the development of the centralised support system.**
- 2. National capacities and technical expertise necessary to implement and strengthen this system need to be enhanced.**
- 3. The complementary role played by NGOs, businesses and broader veterans' networks in providing vital services to veterans needs to be recognised and supported.**

The Ukrainian government, jointly with bilateral partners and donor countries, should work together to ensure resources are adequately and transparently mobilised to support these priorities.

Finally, this system transformation should be **nested within a broader peacebuilding approach** promoting positive relationships within and between veterans and the broader Ukrainian society, and between veterans and the state. Giving veterans a voice over the policy decisions that affect them and making sure they participate in the implementation of the following recommendations is key to improving collaboration and trust at the national level.

Recommendations

Concretely, the Ukrainian government, with the technical and financial support of bilateral partners and donor countries, should focus on implementing the following recommendations. The recommendations are targeted primarily at the new Ministry for Veterans' Affairs, as well as bilateral partners and donor countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Norway, Sweden and others, and international and intergovernmental agencies, namely the UNDP, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), OSCE and NATO Liaison Office.

Priority 1: Promoting an inclusive institutional change as part of the development of an integrated reintegration support system, including the currently developed e-veteran platform

- 1. Merge the multiple strands for medical support, legal advice, benefits-claiming channels and socio-economic opportunities in a way that factors in diverse female and male veterans', and female and male veterans with disabilities' needs, challenges and opportunities.**
 - The development of this system should be led by a working group that includes representatives of former veterans and veterans' networks, legal and psycho-social providers, gender advisers, local and national NGOs, and other relevant stakeholders selected according to relevant and transparent criteria.
- 2. Carry out the (ongoing) registration of former combatants in an inclusive way.**
 - This means accurately recording female and male veterans' situation on the frontline and after demobilisation, and registering volunteers who were not officially registered in the UAF after their integration.
 - To ensure trust and buy-in in the registration process and registry itself, the data-collection process should be done in a sensitive, transparent and fair fashion, and communicated as such, and accessible to former combatants with physical disabilities or mental impairments.
 - It should also be made clear whether the system takes into account only former combatants who retired and/or were demobilised after the system was put in place.
- 3. Effectively apply within the system existing policies related to veterans with disabilities.**
 - Ensure that former combatants with disabilities are registered as such and they are granted the right status, in compliance with law no. 2318-VIII and the amendments to article 7 "on rehabilitation of people with disabilities in Ukraine", officially implemented since 13 March 2018, that give former combatants with combat-related disabilities the status of people with war disabilities and not just disabilities.
 - Avoid duplication and seek synergies between reintegration systems and policies and existing systems and efforts taken at the national level to improve the lives of people with disabilities, such as efforts taken as part of the implementation of the



Kalashnikov rifle in the hands of the military in Ukraine © Vlasov Yevhenii/Shutterstock 2017

National Action Plan for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2012–2020.

Priority 2: Strengthening capacity and technical expertise to effectively implement the new reintegration system

4. Ensure that psycho-social support service providers are systematically trained in and assessed for gender sensitivity and incentivised to learn from successful psycho-social rehabilitation processes and systems in other contexts.

- Service providers should also be trained to regularly collect and report in a sensitive way data on mental health, substance abuse and domestic/intimate partner violence among former combatants, and the general population, that could help inform the development of relevant measures.

5. Systematically provide former combatants with information on available psycho-social rehabilitation processes based on a rigorous system of referrals.

- The UAF, NGOs and other relevant stakeholders should coordinate and keep up-to-date publicly available information on such initiatives, which could be shared with all combatants finishing their service.

6. Support the formation, training and deployment of mobile teams made of psychiatrists, psychologists and other service providers, who would be accessible to (geographically and socially) isolated former combatants and readily available in case of emergencies.

- The set-up of holistic psycho-social support centres for former combatants, such as the ones developed by Alert in 2016–2017, and the model of psycho-social support mobile teams for gender-based violence survivors supported by the UNFPA since 2015 could be replicated and/or scaled up integrating a focus on former combatants' specific needs.

Priority 3: Recognising and supporting the role played by NGOs, businesses and broader networks providing complementary services to veterans

7. Learn from veteran-led businesses and other initiatives aiming to link the private sector with veterans, in Ukraine and beyond, to develop adequate and effective approaches to boost the employability of former combatants while acknowledging their specific pathways.

8. Regularly update existing mapping and collaborate with organisations that work closely with/support veterans, including opinion leaders, cultural associations, faith-based organisations, military chaplains, and other peer-to-peer networks.

- Psycho-social service providers should be cognisant of informal veterans' networks. To do so, a mapping of these networks should be carried out and regularly updated to identify their mission and identify areas of collaboration and support.

Acknowledgements

This policy brief was written by Flavie Bertouille. The author would like to thank the reviewers of this policy brief: Summer Brown, Rebecca Crozier, Julian Egan, Alyona Lukyanchuk and Henri Myrntinen.

International Alert is particularly grateful to the research teams whose findings inform this policy brief, namely Dr Sara Meger from the University of Melbourne and her assistant Hanna Manoilenko and researchers from the organisation Truth Hounds. The authors would also like to thank the former combatants, service providers and family members interviewed for the research.

Saferworld, Conciliation Resources and International Alert are collaborating on a three-year research programme which generates evidence and lessons for policy-makers and practitioners on how to support peaceful, inclusive change in conflict-affected areas. Funded by UK aid from the UK government, the research focuses on economic development, peace processes, institutions and gender drivers of conflict. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.



Endnotes

- 1 Initially labelled by the Ukrainian government as Anti-Terrorist Operations (ATO) and referred to from 2018 as "taking measures to ensure national security and defence, and repulsing and deterring the armed aggression of the Russian Federation in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts".
- 2 After the end of the Second World War, anti-Soviet nationalist groups, such as the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its armed wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), waged a guerrilla war against the Soviet regime and Red Army until the 1950s. These groups provided inspiration for some of the Volunteer Battalions.
- 3 I. Sampan, Ukraine needs the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, 112 international, 22 June 2018, <https://112.international/article/ukraine-needs-the-ministry-of-veterans-affairs-29605.html>
- 4 M. Havryshko, The womanly face of war: The agency and visibility of Ukraine's female soldiers, Open Democracy, 5 December 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/agency-ukraine-female-soldiers/>
- 5 E. Vizgunova, Gendered perception of volunteering: Camouflaged female volunteer soldier in conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Conference Paper, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 22–23 March 2018, https://www.rsu.lv/sites/default/files/imce/Zin%C4%81tnes%20departaments/zinatniskas_konferences/2018/gendered_perception_of_volunteering_eastern_ukraine.pdf
- 6 The term 'veterans' is used interchangeably with the term 'former combatants' in this brief.
- 7 UNFPA, Masculinity today: Men's attitudes to gender stereotypes and violence against women, UNFPA, 2018, https://ukraine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Masculinity%20Today%20Men%27s_Report.pdf
- 8 UN Women, Gender Impact Assessment of the Security and Defense Sector in Ukraine 2017, UN Women, 2018, www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2018/gender%20impact%20assessment%20ukraine%202017_en_fin.pdf?la=en&vs=2742
- 9 Ukrainian Women's Fund with the support of UN Women Ukraine, Invisible Battalion: Women's participation in ATO operations, 2016, www.un.org.ua/images/documents/4475/Invisible%20Battalion%20Study_ENG_FULLL.pdf
- 10 While this is not the focus of this policy brief, the themes that emerged from research questions on combatants' experiences during their service focused on the relations between civilians and military, as well as sexual violence on the frontlines. The research confirmed a lack of reliable and comprehensive data on conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the Donbas (as well as a lack of data on domestic violence and intimate partner violence perpetrated by former combatants compared to the rest of the population). When asked about SGBV on the frontline, (threats of) sexual violence that might have been perpetrated against civilian populations and/or enemy soldiers was tabooed by most respondents, who preferred focusing the conversation on the themes of commercial sex work and transactional sex. Transactional sex between combatants, both from UAF and Volunteer Battalions before their integration, and local civilian women appeared to be widespread. Most male respondents qualified these relationships as "mutually beneficial" and showed stereotyped assumptions of women in the conflict-affected areas, such as the fact they would be "attracted to soldiers". Most respondents also displayed an overall lack of understanding of different forms of gender-based violence, i.e. what constitutes SGBV, sexual exploitation and abuse or sexual harassment. This relates to a broader issue in Ukraine, where SGBV terminology is underdeveloped and forms of violence that fall between explicit sexual consent and sexual assault are not officially qualified.
- 11 Country Policy and Information Note, Ukraine: Military Service, October 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/752332/Ukraine_-_Military_Service_-_CPIN_-_v5.0__October_2018_.pdf, p.18
- 12 The total number of veterans, including combat and non-combat service personnel, former members of the National Guard and security services, and regular conscripts is unknown but is estimated at more than 1.5 million people involved in various conflicts since the Second World War; I. Ponomarenko, Lawmaker: Over 1,000 Ukrainian combat veterans commit suicide since 2014, Kyiv Post, 24 April 2018, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/1000-ukrainian-combat-veterans-commit-suicide-since-2014.html>.
- 13 L. Van Metre, Ukraine's veterans are a powerful constituency. Who will control them?, Atlantic Council, 7 June 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-s-veterans-are-a-powerful-constituency-who-will-control-them>
- 14 UN Women, 2018, Op. cit.
- 15 T. Martsenyuk, G. Grytsenko and A. Kvit, The 'Invisible Battalion': Women in ATO military operations in Ukraine, Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal, 2 (2016), pp.171–187, <http://kmlpj.ukma.edu.ua/article/view/88192/83988>. Referenced in B. Lucas, B. Rohwerder and K. Tull, Gender and conflict in Ukraine, K4D Helpdesk Report, Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2017
- 16 For instance, policies on former combatants with disabilities are disconnected from legal acts to promote the rights of persons with disabilities to independence, social integration and full participation in the life of society without any discrimination, as stipulated in the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2012–2020, the Law on Principles of Prevention and Combating Discrimination, the Law on the Basis of Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities and the Criminal Code of Ukraine.
- 17 T. Istomina, Former soldiers get help at new Veteran Hub, Kyiv Post, 9 November 2018, <https://www.kyivpost.com/lifestyle/former-soldiers-get-help-at-new-veteran-hub.html>
- 18 Situational assessment in three areas in Ukraine: Bessarabia, Kherson and Zakarpattia, London: International Alert, February 2019
- 19 Only one male and one female combatant interviewed had initially joined with the aim of earning a living. When asked why they engaged in the conflict, research participants mentioned diverse reasons and pathways to their mobilisation in the conflict. A majority of female and male former combatants from the research sample participated in the Maidan Revolution and identified the abuses and violence perpetrated by the state/security forces against demonstrators as tipping points in their decision to 'do more' and join the UAF or a Volunteer Battalion. In addition, some of the respondents who had joined Volunteer Battalions explained coming to their service first through their participation in football Ultras groups, thereby showing the potential link between some Volunteer Battalions and the radical fringe of politics. Most male respondents identified the need to protect the Motherland, one's family and home from 'Russia' or 'the enemy' as a key motivation to join the UAF or a Volunteer Battalion.
- 20 Ukraine's unemployment rate in 2017 amounted to 9.5% of the active population. Source: Focus Economics.
- 21 Ukrainian Women's Fund with the support of UN Women Ukraine, 2016, Op. cit.
- 22 I. Ponomarenko, Rada approves law to set up Ministry for Veterans Affairs, Kyiv Post, 27 February 2018, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/rada-approves-law-set-ministry-veterans-affairs.html>
- 23 According to the Ministry of Regional Development and Building, 99% of the public facilities and residential neighbourhoods in the country are not accessible for wheelchair users.
- 24 International Alert, 2019, Op. cit.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Due to the research's sampling method (snowballing), the former combatants interviewed were in contact with others, i.e. not isolated; willing to speak about and share their experiences; and identified as former combatants. While this does not invalidate the research findings, this reveals that visible, networked and socially connected former combatants were accessed as part of the research. This means that some former combatants may not face as many challenges, and therefore may not need to resort to these support networks, while others may be experiencing even bigger challenges than the research sample.
- 27 Alert implemented the project 'Psychosocial seeds for peace' with support from the European Union. For more information, see <https://www.international-alert.org/projects/psychosocial-seeds-peace>.

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