

Promoting veteran reintegration through community-based support centers in rural Ukraine

Policy Area and Scenario

- Policy Area: Humanitarian.
- Scenario: Ukraine regains the territory it held before the 2022 invasion.

This scenario expects the return of a significant number of veterans, many of whom will be expected to relocate to rural and under-resourced regions lacking access to adequate support and reintegration services.

Background and Relevance:

As Ukraine begins to consider reconstruction models, it must address the challenge of reintegrating hundreds of thousands of veterans into post-war society.¹ Having suffered through immense trauma, veterans require adequate support to help them return to their families and restore their old lives. Regions like Kyiv and now Poltava provide returning personnel with veteran support centers, and international efforts have created online channels to facilitate the transition back into civilian life.² However, rural and secondary cities remain critically under-resourced due to their lack of access to online support, and as existing models fail to reach impacted populations beyond urban regions. This gap is highlighted in survey results that show that veterans from such rural regions perceive “psychological counselling and support” to be vastly absent, whereas veterans from urban areas are more satisfied with the level of support they receive.³ The struggle of rural reintegration is exacerbated by economic challenges, as veterans returning to rural regions “are more likely to be unemployed compared to veterans in urban areas and compared to the general population”.⁴ The current situation blatantly reveals that reconstruction models are mainly targeted towards urban areas, failing to adhere to the unique needs of rural communities.

Therefore, rebuilding efforts must go beyond physical rebuilding, and must seek to actively restore the country’s social foundations in a manner that uplifts every community —whether urban or rural—through a cohesive and inclusive approach.

Objectives and Significance:

The policy recommendation will aim to:

- Ensure veterans in rural areas have equal access to post-war integration programs, achieving adequate support.
- Foster social cohesion by promoting the societal integration of veterans back into their communities, and by mobilising community members in the process.

¹ Andrew S. Bowen, “Ukrainian military performance and outlook” *library of Congress*, March 12, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12150>

² “Veteran Support and Development Centre Opens in Poltava Oblast Thanks to Germany and UNDP,” *UNDP*, March 24, 2025, <https://www.undp.org/ukraine/press-releases/veteran-support-and-development-centre-opens-poltava-oblast-thanks-germany-and-undp>

³ Pavlo Sereda et al., “Understanding the Perspectives of Veterans in Ukraine ...,” *SCORE*, December 2023, <https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/Veterans-Report.pdf>

⁴ Pavlo Sereda et al., “Understanding the Perspectives of Veterans in Ukraine ...,” *SCORE*, December 2023, <https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/Veterans-Report.pdf>

- Empower faster local recovery by encouraging veterans to act as recovery agents by aligning their integration with the reconstruction needs of communities.
- Strengthen local resilience by mobilizing community members to participate in the recovery process, introducing basic mental health support capacity through citizen training.
- Support Ukraine's democratic recovery by reinforcing an inclusive and decentralized approach to post-war reconstruction. Long-term social stability breeds functioning democratic practice.

The absence of psychological support beyond larger cities risks promoting social isolation, untreated war trauma, economic challenges and long-term threats to national cohesion and political stability.⁵ Veterans are not only a vulnerable demographic in need of support, but also a critical human resource with the potential to contribute to long-term economic growth and local resilience through civic leadership. Without addressing the pressing challenge of lacking support in rural areas, Ukraine potentially risks worsening regional inequalities and weakening the inclusive recovery process its citizens overwhelmingly demand.⁶ A successful and inclusive reintegration policy could not only strengthen national resilience, but also demonstrate Ukraine's commitment to humanitarian matters, progressing the nation towards its broader democratic goals and wishes of future integration into European structures like the EU.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework:

The proposal will be guided by:

- Comparative case studies to help design successful recovery centers: U.S. Vet Centers, Poltava Oblast center by the UNDP & Germany.⁷
 - Review of academic literature on veteran reintegration into post-war society.
 - Psychological studies that consider the impact of war on veterans, to understand the needs that the strategy must address.
 - Surveys and reports to identify the most crucial areas to consider in policy considering veterans (such as, EU funded *Understanding the Perspectives of Veterans in Ukraine after the 24th of February 2022*)
- Social constructivism: political outcomes are heavily influenced by identities and societal narratives, which emphasizes the need to encourage the view of veterans being crucial to national reconstruction.⁸
- Dependency theory: need for policy to be guided by Ukrainian voices, with local participation rather than dependency on foreign efforts.

⁵ Pavlo Sereda et al., "Understanding the Perspectives of Veterans in Ukraine ...," *SCORE*, December 2023, <https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/Veterans-Report.pdf>

⁶ "Designing Reconstruction in Ukraine," *Institute for State Effectiveness*, accessed April 27, 2025, <https://effectivestates.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ISE-Ukraine-Design-Summary.pdf>

⁷ "Veteran Support and Development Centre Opens in Poltava Oblast Thanks to Germany and UNDP," *UNDP*, March 24, 2025, <https://www.undp.org/ukraine/press-releases/veteran-support-and-development-centre-opens-poltava-oblast-thanks-germany-and-undp>

⁸ Timo Kivimäki, "6: Social Construction of Structures of Peace and Conflict," essay, in *Paradigms of Peace: A Pragmatist Introduction to the Contribution to Peace of Paradigms of Social Science* Imperial College London, 2016. https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/epdf/10.1142/9781783269457_0006

- Systems Theory: stronger local economies and communities will contribute to a more stable Ukraine, benefiting the entire region.

Preliminary Policy Option

Policy option → Veteran reintegration centers through a community-focused design

- Create community-driven veteran reintegration centers in rural regions in order to provide psychological services (like Khmelnytsky—high female demand to enlist).⁹
 - In-person therapists
 - Group recovery sessions, community areas
- Draft tailored employment programs to retrain returning veterans, matching their existing skills with local economic recovery needs.
- Design a pilot model of decentralized humanitarian support that encourages civic participation, unifies communities and reactivates veterans as contributors to overall local recovery.
- Train local community members to provide basic psychological first aid, expanding the reach of support services.

Potential Challenges:

- **Budget Constraint** → Requires sustained funding for long-term support. Securing funding for rural support may not be prioritized by donors or national agencies.
- **Reach** → Successfully covering large rural regions with low population density and lack of relevant infrastructure may be logistically challenging.
- **Social stigma** → Veterans may be reluctant to participate in psychological counseling due to prevalent stigma on the importance of mental health.
- **Administrative capacity** → Due to the decentralized approach of the model, the policy's success depends largely on local activity. Rural areas may lack the necessary administrative capacity and management skills to uphold complex programs.
- **Donor priorities** → International donors may prioritize immediate humanitarian relief and physical reconstruction over long-term reintegration aims. Also, rural regions provide less political visibility, potentially disincentivizing some donors.

⁹ "The Interest among Women in Military Service Has Increased: Top 3 Regions in Terms of the Number of Inquiries to Recruitment Centers," *MoD News*, February 24, 2025, <https://mod.gov.ua/en/news/the-interest-among-women-in-military-service-has-increased-top-3-regions-in-terms-of-the-number-of-inquiries-to-recruitment-centers?>

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