

Ukraine's Veterans: From Fragility to a Pillar of European Security

Klara Lindström & Nicolina Nilsson

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Executive Summary

Ukraine faces the monumental task of reintegrating up to [5 million](#) veterans and their families – nearly ten per cent of its population – once Russia's war has been brought to a full stop. How this transition is handled will not only shape Ukraine's recovery and social cohesion, but also directly impact the stability of Europe's eastern flank and the credibility of the enlargement agenda. For the European Union, the successful reintegration of Ukrainian veterans is a matter of strategy, geopolitics, and Europe's own long-term security. European policymakers are recommended to integrate veterans affairs into EU funding frameworks, to establish an EU-Ukraine Veterans Transition Partnership, and to link successful implementation of veterans policy to the EU accession process.

As Ukraine's [Veterans Policy Strategy](#) nears its first anniversary, and amid waning US funding and engagement, it is timely for European policymakers to integrate veterans affairs into European Union-Ukraine funding frameworks and partnerships, and to link veteran reintegration to the EU accession process. Veterans reintegration is not merely a post-war issue; with over [800,000](#) veterans, reintegration is already one of Ukraine's most pressing political and social challenges.

If supported effectively, Ukraine's veterans can become a cornerstone of Ukraine's national resilience and of Europe's stability. These men and women are not just fighters – they are organisers, logisticians, engineers and leaders who have forged networks of solidarity and command public support. Properly integrated, veterans could drive reconstruction in war-damaged regions, lead local administrations, and anchor Ukraine's democratic development. They can also provide an operational military reserve to help deter future aggression. In short, veterans represent one of the most important strategic [assets](#) for Ukraine's recovery and long-term stability.

The opposite also holds true. The mass return of demobilised soldiers, many of them traumatised and all profoundly changed by years of fighting, if neglected, risks creating a pool of discontent, vulnerable to unemployment and prone to domestic violence, radicalisation or political manipulation. Such fragility would not be confined within Ukraine's borders. Moscow has long mastered the art of exploiting social fractures and will continue to use disinformation, corruption and covert networks to destabilise Ukrainian society from within. A poorly managed veterans [transition](#) would hand the Kremlin precisely the vulnerabilities it seeks.

For the EU, therefore, supporting Ukraine's veterans is not an act of charity, but a strategic investment in its own security. Every euro invested in the reintegration of veterans reduces the risk of instability on the EU's eastern flank. Every programme that prepares Ukrainian veterans for new roles in society is a step forward in anchoring Ukraine firmly in the European project. And every missed opportunity to act is a chance for Russia to exploit division and weakness.

Veterans reintegration is also integral to the EU accession process. At its core, EU enlargement is about establishing independent institutions, long term societal resilience and democratic maturity. A country that cannot reintegrate its defenders will struggle to meet the [Copenhagen criteria](#) on stable institutions and social cohesion. Conversely, a country that can support and empower its veterans signals both effectiveness in securing the human capital needed for accession and a willingness to shoulder the responsibilities of EU membership. Veterans policy can therefore be seen as a test of state capacity.

History offers cautionary lessons. The Balkans in the 1990s showed how fragile states can falter when veterans are left to fend for themselves. Underfunded demobilisation and reintegration programmes left many ex-combatants marginalised and resentful, feeding organised crime and obstructing democratic consolidation. The cases of Bosnia and Kosovo show that alienated former soldiers can become [spoilers](#) in peace processes.

There are also positive [precedents](#). After regaining their independence in the 1990s, the Baltic states invested heavily in retraining and integrating their conscripts and security personnel. These programmes helped support the rapid development of strong institutions. Veterans of independence struggles were absorbed into state-building projects, contributing to the Baltic transformation into stable democracies and EU member states. For Ukraine, the lesson is clear: treating veterans as partners in state-building rather than as a social burden is decisive for successful European integration.

Crucially, by holding the line against Russian aggression, Ukrainian troops have defended the European security order. Every kilometre of territory liberated or held has bought time for Europe to rearm, adapt, and awaken to the reality of geopolitical competition. In this sense, Ukrainian veterans are also Europe's veterans. They have paid the highest price for the values that the EU stands for: independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, democracy, and the right of nations to choose their alliances. Acknowledging this fact reframes veterans affairs from a national challenge into a European responsibility.

How might EU policymakers take on this responsibility? Beyond the individual measures outlined below, a forward-leaning EU approach would treat veterans reintegration as a pillar of European security. First, it would embed veterans into reconstruction by ensuring that they play leading roles in rebuilding destroyed communities. Second, it would strengthen social resilience by investing in regional equality, especially in frontline areas, to prevent fractures that Russia could exploit. Third, it would promote democratic consolidation by empowering veterans as community leaders. Fourth, it would enhance the credibility of the enlargement agenda by demonstrating that the EU links accession not only to legal harmonisation, but also to the lived resilience and cohesion of societies.

Recommendations to EU policymakers

1. Integrate veterans affairs into EU funding frameworks

Reintegration could be established as a cross-cutting theme in the Ukraine Facility and other EU-funded reconstruction instruments. Dedicated resources could be earmarked for veterans' mental health, vocational training and entrepreneurship. EU institutions could explore partnerships with the private sector to support civilian employment opportunities while allowing veterans to continue their military training and education.

2. Establish an EU-Ukraine Veterans Transition Partnership

EU member states, potentially under Nordic-Baltic leadership, could establish a structured platform for cooperation among the EU, Ukrainian institutions and civil society to share expertise on rehabilitation, employment and governance. This platform could help to integrate international best practices on veterans reintegration and promote data-driven, evidence-based policymaking.

3. Link veterans policy to the EU accession process

The European Commission could include a chapter on veterans affairs in its annual [enlargement reports](#) to keep the issue on the agenda and frame veterans reintegration as part of democratic consolidation and state capacity. The EU could especially support Ukraine by engaging regional and local authorities, as well as civil society, to ensure effective policy implementation.



Klara Lindström

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies



Nicolina Nilsson

Second secretary at the Embassy of Sweden in Kyiv

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