

FBA Policy Brief

Ukrainian Veterans' Economic Reintegration

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VETERANS COULD COMPRISE up to a quarter of Ukraine's workforce by the end of the war. As Ukraine rebuilds, veterans' economic reintegration is essential for national recovery and long-term resilience. This FBA policy brief examines the challenges veterans face in the labour market with unemployment, skills mismatches, and financial insecurity. It also suggests how the country's reconstruction efforts can gain from their economic inclusion.

HOW TO REFER TO THIS BRIEF:

McFee & Röders. 2025. FBA Policy Brief: Ukrainian Veterans' Economic Reintegration. *Thematic Policy Brief Series - Ukrainian Veterans' Reintegration*. Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61880/RKSY3523>

Policy recommendations

1. *Align (re)training with market needs:* Veteran retraining programs should be designed to meet the demands of the labour market, with a focus on sectors such as infrastructure, defence technologies, and agriculture.
2. *Boost support for veteran entrepreneurship:* Veterans' entrepreneurial potential can grow with better access to financial support, simpler rules and regulations, and targeted mentorship to help overcome barriers.
3. *Promote inclusive economic recovery for veterans and war-affected groups:* Economic recovery plans should fully incorporate veteran support programs, ensuring that all war-affected groups - including displaced civilians and families of the fallen - benefit from equal opportunities.

Introduction

This policy brief examines the economic reintegration of Ukraine's veterans as a national priority, essential for post-war recovery, social stability, and long-term resilience. With veterans and their family members reconfiguring their economic lives, many face unemployment, skills mismatches, and financial insecurity. At the same time, existing policies require better alignment and accessibility to fully harness veterans' skills for economic growth and reconstruction. To ensure veterans contribute to economic recovery rather than face marginalisation, reintegration must be part of a broader, inclusive strategy that also supports displaced civilians, families of the fallen, and other war-affected groups.

In the context of the Russian invasion, Ukraine's economy contracted by approximately 30% in 2022 and will remain 20% below pre-war levels throughout 2025, with war-related destruction creating severe regional employment disparities, particularly in rural areas.¹ The male-dominated sectors where veterans might traditionally find employment – construction and agriculture – have been especially impacted, with construction facing personnel shortages 2.15 times higher than other industries while agriculture has suffered \$40 billion in losses, leaving 30% of farmland uncultivated.² Millions of Ukrainians have been internally displaced, leading to regional imbalances in labour supply and demand.³ However, these urgent post-war needs present a strategic opportunity: effectively integrating the expanded veteran workforce into reconstruction efforts could partially offset critical labour shortages and accelerate economic recovery, particularly since construction is projected to generate significant multiplier effects during reconstruction.

The following sections outline key barriers to veteran employment, structural gaps in current policies, and targeted recommendations to strengthen retraining programs, workplace readiness, and veteran-led business support while ensuring multi-sector coordination across government, private sector, and civil society to deliver sustainable solutions.

Challenges and Opportunities for Economic Reintegration

The veteran population is expected to surge from 1.2 to 5-8 million veterans and their family members by the war's end, meaning veterans could comprise up to a quarter of Ukraine's 18-20 million workers.⁴ Thus, successful and sustainable economic reintegration is a national priority and fundamental to post-war recovery. Veterans possess valuable skills—discipline, leadership, and adaptability—that make them a critical workforce capable of driving economic growth and strengthening social cohesion. A 2023 survey highlights the urgency of this issue, revealing that securing stable income remains the top concern for veterans, reflecting broader anxieties about economic vulnerability, well-being, and social stability.⁵

However, reintegration presents significant challenges. For many Ukrainian veterans, the transition from military to civilian life is fraught with economic uncertainty. The veteran unemployment rate stands at 30%—double the national civilian average—highlighting a labour market ill-equipped to absorb them.⁶ Many now struggle with prolonged unemployment or significant income declines, placing them at a disadvantage compared to civilians who have retained and developed professional skills throughout the war.⁷

Beyond unemployment, financial insecurity weighs heavily on veterans. Nearly a quarter report that they can only afford basic necessities, forcing them to cut back on essentials like food.⁸ The challenge is compounded by a mismatch between military and civilian job requirements—nearly one-third of veterans feel unprepared for employment, and over half believe they need further training or education to be competitive in the workforce.⁹

Geography adds another layer of complexity. Many veterans returning to rural areas—already struggling with shrinking job markets—find that the employment opportunities they once relied on have disappeared. Younger veterans and those with disabilities face even steeper challenges, as available jobs often fail to accommodate their needs. Meanwhile, over a third of Ukrainian refugees are hesitant to return due to safety and economic concerns, which, depending on the industries hardest hit by their absence, could further complicate labour market integration.¹⁰

Despite these challenges, veterans represent a vital economic asset. Each dollar invested in their rehabilitation is projected to generate six dollars in economic returns.¹¹ Addressing reintegration effectively requires moving beyond prescriptive policies and leveraging veterans' skills as assets for national recovery. A strengths-based framework, targeted training, workplace reforms, and entrepreneurship support can maximise their meaningful contributions to Ukraine's reconstruction and long-term economic growth.¹²

A Strengths-Based Approach to Economic Reintegration

Veterans represent a vital and underutilised resource for Ukraine's economic recovery and long-term resilience. With diverse professional backgrounds and extensive military experience, they bring transferable skills such as leadership, critical thinking, adaptability and technical expertise to the civilian workforce.¹³ Many have also gained advanced knowledge of defence technologies, including cybersecurity, logistics systems, and engineering, further reinforcing their problem-solving abilities, attention to detail and capacity to operate under pressure.¹⁴ Recognising these strengths and building on them is essential for their successful reintegration and for enabling them to play a meaningful role in Ukraine's reconstruction.

A strengths-based approach views veterans not as aid beneficiaries but as active contributors to economic growth, emphasising their leadership, adaptability, and innovative potential—qualities essential for post-conflict recovery.¹⁵ Effective policies should leverage these strengths through tailored training, retraining, and entrepreneurship opportunities while preparing employers to utilise veterans' skills. Aligning support systems with veterans' capacities can drive economic recovery, promote social stability, and position veterans as key agents of stability and development.

However, the reintegration of veterans into the workforce does not occur in isolation but within a broader post-war recovery landscape that includes other war-affected groups. While veterans may benefit from targeted reintegration policies, disparities in access to economic opportunities risk generating

social tensions if other affected populations—such as displaced civilians, the families of the fallen, and those who have lost livelihoods—are left without comparable support.¹⁶ Over-elevating veterans' status without balancing broader recovery needs risks creating long-term alienation, resentment, or unequal access to opportunities.¹⁷ In Ukraine, where war has reshaped the labour market, veterans' reintegration will be one of many factors that need to be considered in the context of broader economic recovery and social cohesion.

Workplace Readiness

Employers often lack familiarity with military roles and veterans' skills, leading to misconceptions about their adaptability and emotional readiness for civilian jobs.¹⁸ Workplace accommodations for disabilities remain inadequate, with only 7% of companies utilising government reimbursement programmes for disability-friendly infrastructure.¹⁹ Additionally, mandatory reserve training obligations and limited awareness of veterans' legal protections and rights²⁰ further complicate workplace integration.²¹

Civil society organisations like *Pryncyp* have stepped in to raise awareness and promote best practices, including retraining disabled veterans and placing them in accessible roles—a model already implemented by Ukrainian Railways. However, broader structural reforms are needed to prepare employers, expand workplace accommodations, and reduce logistical barriers for veterans.

Capacity Building, Education and Retraining

While retraining programmes exist, they often lack alignment with veterans' evolving needs and market demands. Access to these programmes is further hampered by low awareness, rigid admission requirements, and logistical challenges, particularly for veterans in rural areas or those with disabilities.²² This rigidity prevents veterans from taking advantage of emerging economic opportunities and delays their reintegration into productive employment.²³ Additionally, state-funded admission models often limit veterans' ability to select programmes suited to their career goals, and many retraining pathways fail to support mid-career transitions or flexible learning

options. Veterans with limited pre-service work experience face additional barriers, including difficulties competing for skilled positions and accessing tailored programmes.

Despite promising initiatives such as the Cyber Defenders Reintegration Programme and the IREX Veterans Reintegration Programme,²⁴ most veterans rely on personal networks rather than formal employment services. Over 60% of veterans rate state employment centres as ineffective, highlighting the need for better coordination between government agencies, employers and training providers to streamline access and improve programme effectiveness.²⁵

Access to retraining resources is also hampered by low awareness and bureaucratic hurdles. Tools like the Veteran's ID in the Diia and Army+ apps are designed to streamline information and simplify application processes. Still, there is room for strengthening implementation, particularly for veterans in rural areas or those with limited digital literacy. These barriers exacerbate disparities in programme access and prevent veterans from benefiting fully from available resources.²⁶

While training and re-training programmes led by the Ukrainian state authorities, civil society organisations, academia, and international donors represent essential progress, the scale and complexity of the challenges demand expanded efforts. Achieving sustainable outcomes will require scaling existing initiatives, improving alignment between training programmes and evolving labour market demands and addressing systemic barriers that limit veterans' access to employment opportunities.

Veteran Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship presents a promising pathway for veterans seeking independence and flexibility, but success rates for veteran-led startups remain low. While nearly 70% of surveyed veterans expressed interest in starting their own businesses, fewer than 10% have successfully launched ventures, reflecting the significant barriers they face.²⁷ Limited access to startup capital, complex regulatory processes, and a lack of mentorship programmes hinder their ability to establish and sustain businesses. Rural veterans

encounter additional obstacles, including damaged infrastructure and fragmented supply chains, further complicating their entrepreneurial prospects.²⁸

Efforts like the Ukrainian Veterans Foundation and the EU-IOM Veterans' Employment and Community Resilience Project have started addressing these gaps by providing funding and family support for veteran-led businesses. However, the realities of potential remobilisation, economic uncertainty, and post-war relocation place added strain on these enterprises, often making them more vulnerable than their larger private sector counterparts.²⁹ Many veteran-owned businesses struggle with long-term viability and scaling, reinforcing the need for targeted support beyond initial funding.

Conclusion

Ukraine's veterans represent a critical workforce for Ukraine's recovery, bringing skills, resilience and leadership in high demand across economic sectors. Unlocking their full potential requires transparent, accessible, and financially viable pathways for employment, entrepreneurship, and reintegration that align with national reconstruction priorities and supported by partnerships across public, private, and international stakeholders. Scaling successful initiatives to a systemic level will stabilise communities, foster innovation and strengthen Ukraine's resilience in the face of ongoing economic and security challenges. As veterans transition from military to civilian life, effective policies must bridge structural gaps, enabling veterans and their families to thrive while contributing meaningfully to economic growth, defence efforts and long-term national development.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis in this brief, the following recommendations are proposed to guide Ukraine's strategies for veterans' economic reintegration. These recommendations prioritise scaling successful initiatives, improving coordination and accessibility, and addressing systemic barriers to position veterans as drivers of Ukraine's recovery and resilience.

1. Strengthen market-driven veteran (re)training

Current retraining programmes fail to meet evolving labour market needs, particularly in high-growth sec-

tors like infrastructure, defence technologies, and agriculture. Rigid admission criteria, logistical barriers, and bureaucratic inefficiencies limit veterans' access to relevant training, especially in rural areas, hindering their long-term economic reintegration. The Ministry of Veterans Affairs, in coordination with the Ministries of Economy, Education and Science, and the State Employment Service, could lead efforts to expand access to training in infrastructure, defence technologies, and agriculture. Collaboration with vocational institutions, technical universities, and private sector employers is essential to develop flexible, market-driven training pathways. To improve access, international agencies, civil society organisations, and digital platforms could enhance outreach and capability-building, ensuring that veterans—particularly in rural areas—can navigate and benefit from available opportunities.

2. Enhance veteran entrepreneurship support

Veteran-led businesses face low success rates due to limited access to startup capital, complex regulatory processes, and insufficient mentorship and market integration support, among other things. In coordination with the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, and the Ukrainian Veterans Foundation could lead efforts to expand financial support mechanisms, including micro-grants, low-interest loans, and streamlined licensing procedures for veteran-led enterprises. In collaboration with the Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce, international development agencies, and private sector partners, business incubators and mentorship networks could provide targeted support to help veterans navigate regulatory challenges, scale businesses, and connect with broader markets. Civil society organisations can provide complementary mentorship, business training, and legal assistance while advocating for regulatory reforms to simplify licensing and financing. They can facilitate market access, administer micro-grants, support rural infrastructure rehabilitation, and enhance outreach, ensuring veterans—especially in rural areas—gain access to funding, training, and supply chain opportunities.

3. Ensure inclusive economic recovery for veterans and war-affected populations

Veterans play a crucial role in Ukraine's economic recovery. Still, reintegration policies must be designed within a broader, inclusive framework that supports all war-affected populations, including internally displaced persons families of the fallen, and those who have lost livelihoods. Over-prioritizing one group at the expense of others risks deepening economic disparities and undermining social cohesion. The Ministry of Veterans Affairs, in collaboration with the Ministries of Economy, Social Policy, and Ministry of National Unity, could ensure veteran-focused employment, retraining, and entrepreneurship programmes are integrated into national recovery efforts rather than operating in isolation. This includes aligning veteran reintegration initiatives with broader labour market recovery programmes and ensuring displaced civilians and other vulnerable groups can access parallel opportunities. Municipal governments, civil society organisations, and private sector actors could lead community-driven reintegration strategies that foster inclusive employment pathways, business support programmes, and regional development initiatives, ensuring economic recovery benefits all war-affected populations. International development agencies are well-placed to contribute with expertise from global contexts to inform, rather than dictate, locally led solutions.

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Authors biography

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The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. Since 2014, the FBA has been actively engaged in supporting Ukraine's reform and development efforts. Following Russia's full-scale invasion, supporting veterans' reintegration and transition to civilian lives has become a critical component of Ukraine's recovery and long-term resilience. FBA contributes to these efforts by working with stakeholders at national and local levels to develop inclusive reintegration strategies, enhance coordination among state institutions, civil society and international partners, and promote gender-responsive approaches that advance social cohesion, equality and a sustainable recovery.

THEMATIC POLICY BRIEF SERIES: UKRAINIAN VETERANS' REINTEGRATION

This policy brief series is the outcome of an initiative by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) to explore key dimensions of veterans' reintegration in Ukraine. The aim of the series is to contribute to policy development by providing evidence- and experience-based insights into the challenges veterans face in their transitions to civilian life and to offer recommendations that seek to enhance Ukraine's reintegration frameworks. The brief series sets out to present a succinct overview of central dimensions of reintegration processes, viewed through a Ukraine-specific lens, within four key areas: Political reintegration, economic reintegration, gender dimensions of reintegration, and community-based reintegration (CBR).

FBA would like to thank the authors who have shared their knowledge and perspectives to help shape this work. The views and recommendations presented in this series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Sweden, FBA or any other partner organizations.