



КИЇВСЬКА ШКОЛА ЕКОНОМІКИ

МАГІСТЕРСЬКА ПРОГРАМА З ПУБЛІЧНОЇ  
ПОЛІТИКИ ТА ВРЯДУВАННЯ

ДИПЛОМНА РОБОТА

**“The role of civil society in military-to-civilian transition  
of war veterans in Ukraine”**

Студентка: Ємець Ольга

Наукова керівниця: Койдель Олександра

Для здобуття освітнього ступеня: Магістр  
за спеціальністю: 281 Публічне управління та  
адміністрування

Київ 2025

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**ABSTRACT.** Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, many civilians joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which will increase the number of Ukrainian defenders who would be granted the status of veteran when they leave service.

Ukrainian civil society is actively implementing programs and initiatives to offer veterans a chance for successful transitions into civilian life. The study aimed to understand the role of Ukrainian civil society (in particular, NGOs) in veterans' military-to-civilian transition (MCT) through the exploration of their main functions, activity in relation to the state, and their own perception of the place in MCT. Though some scholars mentioned the importance of civil society in the provision of MCT, there has been a lack of focus on the role, power, and participation of NGOs in the reintegration of veterans (Bergman, 2014) (Cooper, 2016). Thus, the area of MCT lacks empirical evidence of the role of the abovementioned facilities in this process. Therefore, a qualitative case study was conducted, which implied expert interviews with the representatives of four Ukrainian NGOs, which are actively engaged in the process of veterans' MCT: «Veteran Hub», «Vilniy Vybiri», «Lobby X» and «Veteranka». Main findings indicate that Ukrainian NGOs provide primarily participatory (identifying problems and proposing solutions) and legitimizing functions (strengthening trust in the state through expertise and partnership). They build partnership or dialogical relation with the state, filling critical service gaps today while laying the groundwork for a more responsive, legitimate, and humane state tomorrow. Rather than existing in competition with the state, they act as co-creators of public infrastructure, contributing to the very understanding of what reintegration should look like in a democratic and inclusive Ukraine.

**Key words:** MCT, NGO, civil society, veterans' reintegration, civil society-state relations

**Word count:** 15948

## INTRODUCTION

As for today, the issue of veterans' reintegration is highly important in Ukraine's agenda. Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, many civilians joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which will increase the number of Ukrainian defenders who would be granted the status of veteran when they leave service. As MCT (military-to-civilian transition) is a key turning point in the lives of military personnel and the life of society, this area needs more research so as to provide military personnel with a successful transition into the civilian realm, overcoming challenges of reintegration. Many scholars have previously tried to come up with a theoretical framework to better understand and find appropriate ways to support service personnel in making successful transitions to civilian life because while many soldiers quite easily came back to their pre-war life, others faced difficulties with reintegration.

A growing body of research on veterans' reintegration has focused on the role of culture in MCT. Scholars like Beverly Bergman (2014) and Linda Cooper (2016) study the influence of culture on the process of leaving the military environment and transferring to a different (previously familiar) social context, and highlight the important role of government, businesses, and local communities in this process. For example, the cultivation of cultural competence and civilian life skills could be provided by personal skills programs, as well as through work

placement. Both works share one common idea – the importance of reintegration of military personnel, which can be provided by the engagement of efforts from NGOs, local communities, businesses, and government, as they are the ones that can put veterans in a new cultural context.

However, the majority of previously mentioned works are very much dependent on the national context - for example, there is a wide range of literature devoted to the readjustment of US veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Orazem, 2017). On the other hand, the Ukrainian context is quite distinguished. For example, while the US and the UK soldiers were mostly taking part in conflicts far from their homeland, Ukrainians are fighting at home for their land, which can have different implications for their adaptation. Secondly, the literature mostly documents the mental and physical outcomes of deploying to war, and challenges arising during MCT; however, there are few studies that show mechanisms for the provision of a successful transition. Many of the previously mentioned papers highlight the importance of local communities, businesses, and NGOs in MCT. On the other hand, there has been a lack of focus on the role, power, and participation of NGOs in the reintegration of veterans. Thus, the area of MCT lacks evidence of how NGOs support reintegration and the state policy in the sphere. This is the *analytical problem* that I will address in my research paper trying to find the answer to the *question*: “How can we understand the role of Ukrainian civil society in veterans’ reintegration in terms of military-to-civilian transition in Ukraine?” Thus, the main goal was to study the role of civil

society in Ukraine in MCT, specifically, the functions of NGOs in supporting veterans' transition to the civilian realm.

Studying the Ukrainian example will make a great empirical *contribution* as Ukrainian veterans' reintegration programs are very much supported and conducted by NGOs. The issue of veterans' reintegration in Ukraine became even more crucial with the start of the full-scale invasion. In January-April of 2023, Ukrainian Veterans Fund carried out research to point out the current needs and challenges of Ukrainian war veterans. About half of the respondents claimed that the government does not fulfill its duties in terms of veterans' policy (Український ветеранський фонд, 2023). At the same time, the pressure of veterans' reintegration for the government is expected to increase with a growing number of people getting the status of veteran after they leave service (the number of veterans and their family members is very likely to rise to 4-5 million people) (Український ветеранський фонд, 2023). Thus, the input (demand) for a better MCT process is only going to increase, while currently, the output of the Ukrainian government does not meet veterans' expectations. However, the demands that are not successfully addressed by the government are being redirected to the NGOs. In the matters of veterans' support Ukrainian government cooperates with NGOs like «Veteran Hub», «Вільний вибір», «Lobby X» and «Veteranka», in order to better address the demands of people. NGOs commonly fill the gaps in service delivery where the state has been unable to deliver them itself (McLoughlin, 2011).

In terms of this, I will study the functions of NGOs that influence MCT through social theory, as suggested by Beverly Bergman (2014) and Linda Cooper (2016) in their studies of MCT. The social theory of structural functionalism addresses social integration and social bonds, as well as their influence on people's behavior. This theory is widely applied when trying to demonstrate how adaptation may take place when a service person transfers to a different social context. For example, through the application of the social theory, Bergman (2014) and Cooper (2016) prove the importance of adaptation of military personnel to a new cultural surrounding, which can be provided by the engagement of efforts from NGOs, local communities, businesses, and government, because they are the ones that can put veterans in a new cultural context. However, they failed to offer empirical examples of the actual mechanisms to provide cultural reintegration by NGOs. Based on this my *theoretical proposition* is that Ukrainian NGOs are key actors in veteran's reintegration, shaping norms, influencing policies, and fostering a supportive social environment. For example, they offer mentoring for businesses on how to create veteran-friendly practices in their companies. They also create manuals on topics like parenthood for veterans, as well as advocate for necessary reforms. Thus, Ukrainian NGOs do not only work on producing norms and policies, but they also contribute greatly to the creation of a favorable social and cultural environment for veterans.

Methodologically, the study relies on a qualitative case study of four purposefully selected NGOs: «Veteran Hub», «Вільний вибір», «Lobby X» and

«Veteranka». The data was collected using semi-structured interviews in the period from February to April and analyzed using context-analysis techniques.

The theoretical framework to understand the functions of civil society in MTC builds on the functional (Müller, 2006) and relational (Chambers and Kopstein, 2008) conceptions of civil society, derived from the public policy and political science literatures. This novel approach allows capturing the functions of civil society in MCT vis-à-vis the state as well as the veterans and other relevant non-state actors.

Considering the scope of the research this thesis consists of an introduction, four chapters, conclusions, discussions and a bibliography. The first chapter begins with a comprehensive literature overview. It describes the theoretical bases of MCT research by offering a wide analysis of its historical becoming, mechanisms of its implementation, as well as the existing studies. It also offers a look at why NGOs might be the necessary mechanisms in the provision of MCT. The second chapter is an overarching description of the analytical and theoretical framework applied in the study. It provides an explanation to how we understand concepts like MCT, civil society, and civil-state relation. The third chapter includes research design while the last chapter presents and discusses the results of the study and policy implications.



## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1. MCT in previous studies***

Many scholars have previously tried to come up with a theoretical framework to better understand and find appropriate ways to support service personnel in making successful transitions to civilian life because while many soldiers quite easily came back to their pre-war life, others faced difficulties with reintegration. As hundreds of thousands of military men and women have been exposed to trauma and combat serving for the US Army in Iraq and Afghanistan, making MCT successful for them was of key priority for public policy and research (Escamilla, 2019). During this period some of the ground works of the areas were presented. Thus, Robert J. Orazem (2017) and his research group contributed by studying the challenges that Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans faced in terms of their identity adjustment. Moreover, with around 22,000 people leaving the UK Armed Forces annually, many of them faced the same challenges (Bergman, Burdett, Greenberg, 2014). Thus, the UK scholars Dr Beverly Bergman (2014) and Linda Cooper (2016) have also contributed to the field by offering two different comprehensive MCT theoretical frameworks designed to aid policy and research in developing successful conditions for transitioning military personnel.

In order to be able to make MCT smoother, researchers tried to better understand the challenges that war veterans faced in terms of their identity adjustment. The previously mentioned work of Robert J. Orazem included empirical research to examine perceptions of identity

adjustment of U.S. veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Orazem, 2017). With his work, he addressed the lack of empirical evidence of the challenges that were the most difficult for veterans to overcome in the process of military-to-civilian transition. In terms of this research, the authors conducted a planned thematic analysis of text written by a hundred randomly selected Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans. The participants were asked to describe the challenges and difficulties that they faced during their reintegration. They contributed by identifying five core areas of identity adjustment that posed the biggest challenges for veterans - they did not belong in civilian society, missed the military culture lifestyle, held negative views of civilian society, and had difficulty finding meaning in the civilian world because of the lack of new cultural skills.

Other authors, like Cooper (2016) and Bergman (2014) tried to extend the research by offering theoretical frameworks to better understand the challenges that were mentioned in Orazem's research. Both authors mention that experiences of reintegration for veterans are greatly undertheorized, having little to no theoretical frameworks that would aid successful policies. Particularly, they both try to address this theoretical gap by studying the influence of culture (military culture, in particular) on the process of leaving the military environment and transferring to a different (previously familiar) social context. However, the authors have two different approaches to this problem.

Bergman contributed to the studies of MCT by explaining the nature of veterans' transition - a model of

culture shock on becoming a member of the armed forces, followed by reverse culture shock on returning to civilian life. She works with a theoretical puzzle, where she contrasts a widely used veterans transition model of “institutionalism” with a model of reverse culture shock that the author herself proposed. The author mentions that a comprehensive understanding of the influence of military culture on the process of transition is essential to the provision of appropriate support to personnel leaving the armed forces. While Bergman mostly explained the nature of MCT as well as worked in the theoretical paradigm of cultural shock, Cooper offered a more comprehensive study of the culture’s role in the process of veterans’ reintegration. Her conceptualization of MCT offered a better understanding of reintegration as well as some mechanisms to provide a successful transition. In contrast to the idea of cultural shock, Cooper’s research rests on the social theory framework of Pierre Bourdieu and his concepts of habitus, fields, and capital. On the empirical example of the veterans of the U.K. Armed Forces, the author employed the social theory framework to explain how processes of cultural persistence and adaptation take place. Thus, she offered a theoretical modeling of mechanisms. Applying Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital and field, the author also offers practical advice for successful transition experiences. The author highlights the important role of government, businesses, and local communities in this process. For example, the cultivation of cultural competence and civilian life skills could be provided by personal skills programs, as well as through work placement. The authors claim that the recognition of

Bourdieu's framework for the MCT framework can be applied across national and geographical settings and has the possibility to shape and inform a more successful transition in practice. All of the abovementioned works share one common idea – the importance of reintegration of military personnel, which can be provided by the engagement of efforts from NGOs, local communities, businesses, and government. As they are the once that can put veterans in a new cultural context.

While Orazem's research empirically proves the difficulties of veterans to adapt their identity formed by the military surrounding, Cooper and Bergman offered insights into the role of culture for the positive or negative experiences of MCT. However, the work of Orazem is very much dependent on the national context (it studies the experiences of the US personnel). On the other hand, the Ukrainian context is quite distinguished. For example, while the US soldiers were mostly taking part in conflicts far from their homeland, Ukrainians are fighting at home for their land, which can have different implications for their cultural adaptation. Secondly, all of the previously mentioned papers highlight the importance of local communities, businesses, and NGOs in MCT. However, they offer no insights into how exactly they can positively influence the reintegration of veterans based on the offered frameworks. Thus, the area of MCT lacks empirical evidence of successful implementation of veterans' reintegration and the role of the abovementioned facilities in this process. This is the analytical problem that I will address in my research paper. Studying the Ukrainian example will

make a great empirical contribution as Ukrainian veterans' reintegration programs are very much supported and conducted by NGOs like «Veteran Hub», «Veteranka» etc. Consequently, we will try to study the role of Ukrainian NGOs in veterans' reintegration.

## ***2.2. Civil society participation in MCT in Ukraine***

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine will increase the number of Ukrainian defenders who would be granted the status of veteran when they leave service. Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, many soldiers joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which will increase the number of Ukrainian defenders who would be granted the status of veteran when they leave service. In January-April of 2023, Ukrainian Veterans Fund carried out research to point out the current needs and challenges of Ukrainian war veterans. About half of the respondents claimed that the government does not fulfill its duties in terms of veterans' policy (Український ветеранський фонд, 2023). Some of the spheres that veterans expect to receive more help from the government include health issues, financial support, better living conditions, education, employment, psychological support, entrepreneurship, etc. One year later, in November 2024 they updated results by carrying out another research about the needs of veterans. The updated research shows no changes in the veterans' needs that have to be addressed. They still expect to get better help with health issues, financial, psychological, and legal support. 58% of the respondents are

feeling lack of respect to them in the society (Український ветеранський фонд, 2024). It shows that there have been no substantial changes in how the government handles the needs of veterans. On top of that, compared to 44,6% of respondents believing that the government does not fulfill its duties in terms of veterans' policy in 2023, the number of veterans who have the same point of view has increased to 53% in 2024. At the same time, the pressure of veterans' reintegration for the government is expected to increase with a growing number of people getting the status of veteran after they leave service (the number of veterans and their family members is very likely to rise to 4-5 million people) (Український ветеранський фонд, 2023). However, the demands that are not successfully addressed by the government are being redirected to the NGOs. In the matters of veterans' support Ukrainian government very much cooperates with NGOs like «Принцип», «Veteran Hub», «Юридична сотня», «Простір можливостей», «Вільний вибір», «Lobby X» and «Veteranka», in order to better address the demands of people. They commonly fill the gaps in service delivery where the state has been unable to deliver them itself (McLoughlin, 2011).

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainian civil society has seen a threefold growth in NGOs, with most shifting their focus to war-related challenges and 86% engaging in recovery and reconstruction efforts. (Andriieva, Kurylo, Nabok, Rudolph, 2023, p.4; p.13). NGOs have also played leading roles in delivering veterans' support. In the sphere of reintegration Ukrainian NGOs are implementing programs and initiatives to provide a positive

cultural and social environment for the reintegration of veterans. For example, they offer mentoring for businesses on how to create veteran-friendly practices in their companies, while also creating manuals on topics like parenthood for veterans. Also, in 2023 five Ukrainian NGOs jointly presented a conception on a new public veteran policy, relying on their long experience of working in this area. Thus, I believe that Ukrainian NGOs are also actively engaged in the process of veterans' reintegration through shaping norms, influencing policies, and fostering a supportive social environment.

This study aims to make empirical contributions by studying NGOs' role in terms of veterans' reintegration. In order to do this, we would have to answer the following research questions (RQ):

**RQ1.** What functions does civil society perform to provide reintegration for veterans in Ukraine?

This question focuses on the specific functions and services provided by NGOs to facilitate veterans' reintegration. It will examine the programs, initiatives, and support mechanisms that NGOs implement, such as employment assistance, mental health services, legal aid, and community-building efforts.

**RQ2.** How do we conceptualize relations between civil society and the state in terms of veterans' reintegration?

This question investigates the type of relations between veteran NGOs and the state. It will assess whether NGOs prefer

to be in partnership with the state institutions or act apart from them.

**RQ3.** How does civil society see its role in veterans' reintegration in terms of military-to-civilian transition in Ukraine?

This question aims to explore how NGOs position themselves in this process, their significance in addressing veterans' needs, and their contributions compared to other actors, such as the state and private sector.



## THEORY

### *3.1. Theoretical framework*

The problem will be studied through the systemic approach (Easton, 1957). The systemic approach studies the structure and procedures that provide cooperation between society (which produces inputs) and politics (that react to the demands). Thus, this approach is believed to be the most efficient in terms of studying the mechanisms of providing people with the best response to their inputs. The issue of veterans' reintegration in Ukraine became even more crucial with the start of the full-scale invasion. The input (demand) for a better MCT process is only going to increase, while currently, the output of the Ukrainian government does not meet veterans' expectations (Український ветеранський фонд, 2023, 2024). However, the demands that are not successfully addressed by the government are being redirected to the NGOs. State–NGO relations have also been studied through the paradigm of institutionalism (Hall & Taylor, 1996), (McLoughlin, 2011). However, such an approach wouldn't be as relevant for the explanation of the mechanisms of the influence as the systemic one. An institutional approach would offer much more insight if we were to study cultural or historical practices, which caused the proliferation of NGO engagement in Ukrainian veterans' support policy.

### *3.2. Definition of MCT*

A review of the literature suggests that the majority of military personnel make a smooth transition into civilian life,

but a substantial minority go on to experience difficulties in such areas as mental health, finding suitable employment, and cultural reintegration (Pedlar, Thompson, Castro, 2019). Accordingly, finding the best ways to support veterans in making successful transitions to civilian life is believed to be a priority for public policy and research. However, the meaning of reintegration may differ when applied by scholars to different contexts. The concept of transition is oftentimes used interchangeably with the following terminology: “reintegration” and “readjustment”. A comprehensive conceptual analysis by Christine Elnitsky (2017) concludes that while (*community*) *reintegration* places primary emphasis on participation in life’s many roles, *transition* tends to emphasize movement across institutional settings, and *readjustment* highlights the psychological functioning of readapting to civilian life after deployment. Thus, in this research, we recognize MCT as the period of reintegration into civilian life from the military that involves the process of change that a service person necessarily undertakes when their military career comes to an end (Elnitsky, 2017), (Cooper, 2016). Although reintegration is often conceptualized as a positive series of events, many also describe transition as a key turning point in the lives of military personnel, which brings challenges related to many areas of life, including identity crises, as released members adjust to living in civilian society (Atuel & Castro, 2019), (Orazem, 2017), (Bergman, 2014) (Pedlar, Thompson & Castro, 2019). For example, Orazem (2017) found that Afghanistan and Iraq veterans felt that they did not belong in civilian society and held negative views of

civilian society. Thus, a good transition process should enable ex-service personnel to be resilient to adapt successfully to civilian life (Elnitsky, 2017).

### ***3.3. Understanding the role and functions of civil society.***

#### ***3.3.1. Defining civil society***

Many scholars who have studied Ukraine's civil society claim that it has been a driving force behind significant transformations within the state, particularly during periods of socio-political instability and changes (Ghosh, 2014) (Zarembo & Martin, 2023) (Soldatiuk-Westerveld, Deen, & van Steenbergen, 2023). After regaining its recognition in the late 1980s, the concept of civil society has gained increasing prominence across academic, political, and policy discussions over the years (Keane, 1998). However, this broad usage has also led to conceptual ambiguity, inconsistencies, and debates regarding its precise definition and role.

Given this complexity, this section aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of civil society's key functions, which is essential for addressing RQ1 - examining the specific activities and services provided by NGOs as key actors in veterans' reintegration. Understanding these functions is particularly important as civil society is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon, studied from diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives. Scholars have sought to define its fundamental characteristics, yet the scope and

influence of civil society continue to evolve in response to political and social developments.

One of the most widely accepted definitions was proposed by Salamon and Anheier (1998), whose framework has significantly shaped the field. They describe civil society as a sector that encompasses a diverse range of entities varying in size, age, field of activity, and internal structure. Despite these differences, these organizations share five fundamental characteristics: (1) they are organized and possess some institutional reality, (2) they are private and institutionally separate from government, (3) they do not return profits to directors or owners, (3) they are self-governing, (5) they are voluntary. Importantly, they connected such a vision of civil society to its structural and organizational side, which helped them create a comparative mechanism for the power of civil society. Thus, they saw non-profit sectors as a representation of civil society. These defining attributes distinguish civil society from the two other primary sectors - the state and the market. This distinction is fundamental, as civil society operated outside direct governmental control while also being separate from purely commercial and private life activities. This vision of civil society perfectly aligns with the study, as we will study the experience of NGOs to understand the role of civil society in MCT.

Expanding on this idea, Chambers and Kopstein (2008) describe civil society as an uncoerced associational sphere of life that exists independently from both the family and the state. Similarly, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (2022) acknowledges that civil

society consists of social activities that are not part of state affairs, business operations, or private life. However, they introduced an additional characteristic - civil society organizations are unified by a shared vision of the public interests, which defined their collective mission and distinguished them from other sectors.

This perspective aligns with Lewis (2003), who emphasizes that NGOs - one of the key actors within civil society - are inherently value-driven organizations committed to social causes. Their role extends beyond institutional boundaries, as they actively engage in advocacy, service provision, and policy influence, reinforcing the broader significance of civil society in governance and public life.

Building on these perspectives, this study adopts a definition of civil society that aligns with the structural and organizational approach outlined above. Specifically, civil society is understood as a sphere composed of formally established, non-governmental, non-profit organizations that are self-governing, voluntary, and driven by a commitment to the public good. In line with Salamon and Anheier's (1998) criteria, this study focuses exclusively on organizations - rather than individual or informal groups - as the primary units of analysis. These organizations serve as institutionalized actors that not only deliver services but also shape societal norms, influence public discourse, and contribute to state accountability. By adopting this definition, the study situates NGOs as central agents of civil society whose structured efforts play a crucial role in the reintegration of war veterans in Ukraine.

### 3.3.2. *Functions of civil society*

Beyond its structural attributes, civil society is also examined in terms of its functional dimensions. Müller (2006) offers a widely recognized summary of civil society's core roles - ***protective, participative, legitimizing, and integrative***. These functions provide a strong theoretical basis for understanding civil society's role in democracy.

The first function that Müller mentioned is the *protective* one. It implies the role of civil society as a protector from state interference, which secures the space of civic autonomy and lowers the risk of the abuse of power (Müller, 2006, p. 318). Through its *participative* role civil society enables individuals to engage in public affairs without solely relying on politicians (if someone wants to oppose a gas station or support building a playground, they can participate directly through community groups or advocacy organizations) (Müller, 2006, p. 319). As a result, civil society helps to spread information and knowledge widely, improving democratic decision making. Given that civil society usually focuses on specific issues, they can detect problems or risks earlier than political parties, as well as propose political solutions more quickly.

The *legitimizing* function of civil society means that civil society gives the government legitimacy by helping form public trust and public opinion. Since civil society is independent, it can make sure that political decisions are fair and rational. In a democracy, a government cannot

ignore public opinion for long without losing power. That's why a strong civil society is essential - it keeps the government accountable and ensures that policies reflect the real needs of society (Müller, 2006, p. 318).

The final, *integrative* function of civil society refers to its role in building social bonds, loyalty, and a sense of belonging among individuals and groups. It teaches individuals that working together is the key to influencing change. Even if their demands are not immediately acted upon, the democratic process ensures that they can keep pushing for their interests over time (Müller, 2006, p. 319).

While Müller's framework explains the fundamental purposes of civil society, it does not set criteria that would assign certain functions to a particular sphere of work. Thus, a clear operationalization of each function is needed to determine in empirical research which type is present in a given context. In view of this, I will apply previous empirical studies that offer a more nuanced understanding of how these functions manifest in practice. In recent years, numerous studies have sought to analyze its contributions across various sectors, particularly in security governance and state-civil partnership.

For instance, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (2022) conducted a comprehensive study on the role of civil society in security sector governance. Their analysis highlights that civil society serves as a counterbalance to government policies by voicing public opinion, providing alternative perspectives, and offering innovative policy

solutions. Moreover, it plays a crucial role in strengthening democratic security governance by fostering dialogue between the government and the population, thereby enhancing transparency and accountability.

According to the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (2022), civil society strengthens security governance through the following key functions: (1) ***awareness-raising*** (educating the public through information campaigns and information dissemination); (2) ***advocacy*** (facilitating dialogue with policymakers, including members of parliament, government officials, and security institutions, to promote necessary reforms); (3) ***monitoring and public oversight*** (assessing the impact of government actions, identifying shortcomings, and proposing improvements); (4) ***research and analysis*** (providing expert insights, data, and policy recommendations to enhance security governance); (5) ***service provision*** (supplementing state efforts by delivering essential services, particularly in security and justice sectors). Studies examining Ukraine's civil society in other areas largely align with these functions, reaffirming the sector's crucial role in governance, policy reform, and public service delivery (Soldatiuk-Westerveld, Deen, van Steenberg, 2023).

Such a practical vision of civil society functions clearly complements the theoretical framework offered by Müller. However, during the analysis and coding of the data, it became apparent that awareness-raising, although present in several of Müller's (2006) civil society functions, is not a homogeneous activity. Instead, its purpose and meaning



vary depending on the function it supports, which called for the creation of separate subcategories of awareness-raising within the framework of this study. For example, within the participatory function, awareness-raising is understood primarily as the communication of proposed solutions, based on research or direct service experience, to government institutions and other relevant stakeholders. In contrast, when awareness-raising is associated with the legitimizing function, it takes on a different meaning. Here, it is best understood as an exchange of experience - a process by which NGOs transfer accumulated knowledge, methodologies and best practices to government institutions. This helps strengthen public institutions and ensure they are equipped to deliver services in a way that meets the needs of the public, thereby enhancing their trust and legitimacy.

Based on Müller's (2006) typology, we will consider the role as *participative* if NGOs engage in public affairs through advocacy, research, and awareness-raising. Through research and analysis, NGOs have a chance to detect shortcomings and offer their solutions. Awareness-raising in terms of participative dimension will be understood as civil society's communication about the offered solutions to the government institutions or other stakeholders. However, the Ukrainian context requires an additional view on civil society's participative role. Ukrainian NGOs do not only propose solutions but actively step in where the state fails to do so. Thus, participative roles will also be recognized in cases of service provision, when NGOs deliver essential services, supplementing state efforts.

Meanwhile, the *legitimizing* functions are reflected in monitoring and awareness raising. While monitoring allows organizations to see if state actions in veterans support policies align with the actual needs of the group, awareness raising is a way to communicate the solutions to be taken up in order to remain trusted by the society. In this case awareness-raising will be understood as expertise sharing - in the case of participative role NGOs offer solutions to various problems, but with legitimizing functions they pass expertise and knowledge to the state in an attempt to create a reliable institution.

The *protective* function, which defends rights and freedoms of civil society, also connects with monitoring and service provision, ensuring democratic principles are upheld.

The *integrative* function of civil society, as defined by Müller (2006), focuses on its role in strengthening social ties, shared identity, and a sense of belonging, which are essential for sustaining democratic participation over time. It is difficult to choose certain roles offered by Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (2022), as they do not explicitly include what Müller (2006) describes as the integrative function, which refers to the capacity of civil society to foster social cohesion, shared values, and a sense of belonging among citizens. This omission is particularly significant in the Ukrainian context, where civil society organizations not only fill institutional gaps but also build and sustain communities, especially among marginalized groups such as women

veterans. This study therefore considers the integrative function as a separate and necessary dimension that complements the Geneva System. In operational terms, the integrative role is reflected in community building efforts. By using Müller's typology, the analysis captures aspects of civil society work related to identity formation.

This framework of civil society functions provides a valuable analytical lens for examining the role of civil society in veterans' reintegration in Ukraine and specifically answering RQ1 about specific actions of the civil society. By applying these four key functions - *protective, participative, legitimizing, and integrative* - I will assess how Ukrainian NGOs contribute to supporting veterans as they transition from military to civilian life.

### ***3.4. Relation of civil society to the state***

We have already explored the various ways scholars define civil society. While it is widely accepted that civil society is distinct from the state, it does not operate in isolation. Its effectiveness is often shaped by its interaction with government institutions. Key functions as advocacy, monitoring, research, and even service provision frequently depend on the nature of civil society's engagement with the state. Thus, the relations between civil society and the state in the matter of veterans' reintegration are inevitably in focus of the research.

Given that Ukrainian veteran NGOs actively cooperate with the government through advocacy, policy

proposals, and service initiatives, it is essential to examine the extent and nature of this cooperation. Therefore, RQ2 was included to analyze civil society's role and functions through the lens of how these partnerships influence veterans' reintegration efforts.

Civil society-state relations will be studied with regard to Chambers and Kopstein's (2008) typology for how state and civil society might interact. They pinpoint six possible relations, which are neither mutually exclusive nor try to compete (Chambers, Kopstein, 2008, p. 2):

1. civil society apart from the state;
2. civil society against the state;
3. civil society in support of the state;
4. civil society in dialogue with the state;
5. civil society in partnership with the state;
6. civil society beyond the state;

The concept of civil society apart from the state emphasizes its distinct characteristics and boundaries. It implies that the most important function of civil society is to maintain separation from the state provided by the liberal constitutional order. Chamber and Kopstein (2008) describe this boundary as "negative" - designed primarily to keep the state out rather than to impose strict internal regulations. Thus, for civil society to be able to function apart from the state, a strong rule of law must be in place to limit state interference.

One of the manifestations of civil society against the state was present in the activity of the East

European dissidents under Communism (Chambers, Kopstein, 2008, p. 5) Their groups were able to oppose the state when the government was showing signs of weakening. They describe revolutions of 1989 as civil society's assertion against the state. Considering this, civil society's role manifests in various forms, from avoiding interaction with the state to street demonstrations and protests.

While functioning in dialogue with the state, civil society holds the state accountable through public debate. In this framework, critical discourse serves as a test of legitimacy, assuming that injustice cannot withstand public scrutiny. However, maintaining a strong public sphere requires active civic engagement, not just constitutional guarantees. Social movements play a crucial role in this dialogical relationship, employing both offensive (influencing laws, shaping public opinion) and defensive strategies (expanding civic participations and public debate) (Chambers, Kopstein, 2008, p. 7). Such movements strengthen democracy by forcing the state to respond to new voices and concerns.

The perspective of civil society in support of the state draws on a neo-Tocquevillian view that emphasizes its role in fostering democratic values and civic engagement. Civil society is seen as both supporting and challenging the state - while it strengthens democracy by cultivating shared values, it can also resist state overreach. Associational life not only allows individuals to pursue diverse interests but also helps create a common civil culture based on cooperation, respect, and reciprocity. However, while civil society is often

viewed as a force for good, its impact depends on whether it upholds democratic values or reinforced exclusion and violence.

Civil society in partnership with the state stems from the idea that “the nation state is seen as inadequate on a number of fronts” (Chambers, Kopstein, 2008, p. 8). It advocates for decentralizing governance by shifting functions from the state to civil society. This approach is rooted in classical social theory but responds to modern challenges of complexity, governance, and democracy. The nation-state is seen as inadequate in multiple ways - the lack of capacity to address issues without civil society’s mediation or simply being absent in some areas “by default”. Given this, civil society might step in, when the state is absent in some areas or it intentionally delegates responsibilities to civil society.

The final type of civil society, described as beyond the state, refers to its transnational nature, where associations and NGOs operate across national borders, often engaging with global issues such as human rights, climate change, and international governance. While this perspective highlights the growing importance of civil society in the global arena, the transnational dimension falls outside the scope of this research, which focuses specifically on the domestic role of Ukrainian NGOs in veterans’ reintegration within the national context.

A clear operationalization of each type is needed for us to be able to determine in empirical research,

which type is present in a given context. Based on Chambers and Kopstein's (2008) typology we will consider relation as being *apart from the state* if there is separation from the state provided by the constitutional order with no signs of interference from or cooperation with the state. If a civil society organization openly opposes or resists state authority (through protests, advocacy, or public criticism), it will be granted the type of civil society *against the state*. The organization is believed to work *in support of the state* when it works on strengthening democratic norms, shared values, and civic identity. For a civil society to be seen as operating *in dialogue with the state* it is supposed to engage in critical but constructive dialogue with the state through public consultations, expert groups, or advisory roles, offering feedback and alternative perspectives. Whereas government actors are responsive to feedback, criticism, or recommendations. Civil society *in partnership with the state* is recognized, if civil society addresses issues and fills the gaps where the state failed to act. This might happen either when the state delegates some issue to organizations or civil society initiates decisions without any delegation from the state.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Considering that the study aims to better understand the role of civil society in MCT, the study employs qualitative research. Qualitative study helps to describe the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon, which we are intending to do by analyzing experiences of different NGOs (Creswell, 2014). In the scope of studying civil society, I will primarily focus on formally registered non-governmental organizations as one of the key actors of civil society. This way it is more “analytically useful and empirically manageable” to study the role of civil society (Stewart and Dollbaum 2017, p. 208).

### *4.1. Case selection*

The case of Ukraine was chosen for this study based on several important considerations. First, Ukraine’s current socio-political context is highly relevant to the research topic. Since 2014, a significant number of individuals has been granted veteran status due to the ongoing war, and this number continues to grow amid the full-scale war.

Secondly, Ukrainian NGOs have become key actors in supporting veterans through the MCT, addressing a wide range of social, psychological, and practical needs. The NGOs included in this study have actively implemented initiatives aimed at creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for veterans.



This research focuses on four Ukrainian NGOs actively involved in veterans' MCT: «Veteran Hub», «Veteranka», «Lobby X», and «Вільний вибір» (Table 1).

**Table 1. The list of organizations**

NGO Name	Main Focus/Area of Work	Relevance to MCT (Military-to-Civilian Transition)
Veteran Hub (website: <a href="https://veteranhub.com.ua/">https://veteranhub.com.ua/</a> )	Veteran Hub has departments operating in Kyiv, Vinnytsia and Dnipro. It provides comprehensive, individualized services to veterans, adapting its support to each person's experiences and needs. These services include psychological assistance, legal support information coordination, and help with individualized requests, ensuring that veterans receive holistic and tailored care throughout their reintegration journey. Based on research and daily interactions with	Advocacy, service provision, awareness-raising, research and analysis

	<p>veterans, the organization identifies systemic challenges and develops solutions to improve veterans' well-being and civilian reintegration environments.</p> <p>Veteran Hub plays a significant role in advocacy efforts: notably, it contributed to drafting the National Strategy of Veteran Policy, demonstrating the organization's influence in shaping systemic reforms.</p>	
<p>Veteranka (website: <a href="https://uwvm.org.ua/uk/">https://uwvm.org.ua/uk/</a>)</p>	<p>Veteranka is a community of over 1000 women veterans, women in the military and volunteers. It supports women veterans by providing psychological assistance, peer-to-peer support, and educational programs</p>	<p>Advocacy, awareness-raising, research and analysis</p>

	<p>for social reintegration. The organization advocates for systemic changes (contributed to drafting the National Strategy of Veteran Policy) and promotes women's rights within the security and defense sector. Additionally, one of its key initiatives is the Veteranka sewing workshop, a social enterprise producing women's military uniforms, underwear, and other essential items for servicewomen.</p>	
<p>Lobby X (website: <a href="https://veterans.thelobbyx.com/">https://veterans.thelobbyx.com/</a>)</p>	<p>Lobby X is a large-scale Ukrainian organization that connects talent with employers, currently partnering with over 2200 employers and maintaining a database of more than 210 000 candidates</p>	<p>Service provision, awareness-raising</p>

	<p>(Lobby X). In addition to its broad employment platform, Lobby X runs a specialized veteran support program. It assists veterans in transitioning to civilian employment by helping them leverage their military experience for professional growth. Through personalized career counseling, veterans receive support in building CVs, identifying job opportunities, developing new skills, and planning their career paths. Career consultants provide continuous guidance throughout the job search and reintegration process. The organization has signed a memorandum of cooperation with the State Employment Service of Ukraine,</p>	
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	which serves as an official information partner.	
Vilniy Vibir (website: <a href="https://www.vvybir.org.ua/">https://www.vvybir.org.ua/</a> )	Vilniy Vibir provides individual psychological support to veterans and their family members, helping them adapt to civilian life. The organization also develops educational programs for specialists working in veterans' affairs and promotes psychoeducational initiatives for the broader public. In 2024, the organization carried out 9 378 consultations (Vilnyi Vybir).	Service provision, awareness-raising,

The selection of these organizations was guided by the following criteria:

1. They reflect Salamon and Anheier's (1999) definition of NGOs. Each organization meets the five key criteria

outlined by the authors: (1) they are formally organized and possess institutional reality, (2) they are private and structurally separate from government, (3) they do not distribute profits to directors or owners, (4) they are self-governing, and (5) they are based on voluntary participation.

2. Organizations' direct involvement in veteran reintegration efforts. Most of the selected NGOs were established after the onset of military conflict in 2014, in response to growing unmet needs among the veteran population and a lack of comprehensive state policies in this area.
3. Ubiquity - their ability to operate beyond a single locality and impact the veteran community at the national level. For this reason, local and regional organizations were not included in the sample. The focus was placed on NGOs that have a nationwide presence or nation-level influence, either through direct services, advocacy, or public engagement across multiple regions of Ukraine.
4. Reputation and influence. These organizations are recognized within the veteran community and among broader civil society actors for their impact and

credibility. Importantly, most of them actively engage in work with governmental institutions in terms of needed policy changes for veterans' military-to-civilian transition.

5. Diversity of approaches. The selected NGOs represent a range of activities, including service provision, advocacy, research, and awareness-raising, allowing a more comprehensive understanding of civil society's multifaceted role.
6. Availability and willingness to participate. Practical considerations, such as the ability to establish contact and conduct interviews, also influences the selection, given the ongoing security and organizational constraints in Ukraine.

Initially, the scope of NGOs intended for inclusion in the study was broader. In addition to the organizations analyzed, I also sought to engage the following veterans' organizations: "Принцип", "Юридична сотня", and "Простір Можливостей". These three NGOs have been among the leading actors in advancing the concept of a new veterans' policy proposed by Ukrainian civil society - alongside Veteran Hub and Veteranka. However, these organizations did not meet the criterion of availability and willingness to participate. Despite multiple attempts to establish contact through various channels, no responses were

received. Consequently, they were excluded from the final sample.

Though the number of interviewees is limited, the study has reached theoretical saturation, as described by Uwe Flick (2014). That is, additional interviews mostly did not yield new themes or insight relevant to the core categories of the study.

#### ***4.2. Data collection and analysis***

Data for this study was collected through *expert interviews* with representatives of the four NGOs described earlier. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, allowing participants to reflect freely on the mechanisms their organizations use to support the reintegration of veterans. The interview guide (see Annex I) consisted of three core sections:

- Questions about the functions of NGOs in the MCT transition;
- Discussion of the relation with the state;
- Exploration of the role as seen by NGOs in this process.

Before conducting the interviews, all participants were provided with an informed consent form via Google Forms. This form explained the purpose of the study, guaranteed confidentiality, and asked for permission to record the conversations for research purposes.

Four expert interviews were conducted online via the Zoom platform in the period from February to April. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. The



recordings were then transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA 12, a qualitative data analysis software.

A combination of content-analysis techniques was used to analyze the data. First-level codes were predefined based on theoretical concepts about the functions of NGOs and the type of relations with the state they have. This reflects a directed content analysis approach, which is appropriate when existing theory or prior research offers a solid foundation for analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Unlike a conventional content analysis - which is typically used when there is little theoretical groundwork - a directed approach allows for the deductive application of existing theory to guide initial coding.

The coding process began with these predefined categories, drawn from the theoretical framework on civil society functions and state-civil society relations. However, the method remained flexible: data that did not fit existing categories were noted and later examined to determine whether they suggested new themes or subcategories.

Questions related to the role of NGOs (RQ3) were analyzed using conventional content analysis, also known as inductive category development (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). No preconceived categories were applied; instead, categories were derived directly from the interviewees' responses. Since the study focuses on capturing the personal perspectives of NGO representatives regarding their role in military-to-civilian transition (MCT), no pre-existing theoretical framework was imposed during the analysis.

It is important to acknowledge that interviews capture perceptions filtered through the lens of the interviewees (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, while this research offers valuable insights into how NGOs perceive their roles and challenges in veterans' reintegration, further research would be necessary to capture the perspective of veterans themselves, particularly in terms of their experiences with such organizations during the MCT process.

#### ***4.3. Limitations***

This study employed a qualitative, interview-based methodology to explore the role of Ukrainian civil society (in particular NGOs) in the reintegration of veterans into civilian life. The use of expert interviews provided rich, context-specific insights into the experiences, strategies, and perspectives of civil society actors actively engaged in MCT. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in conversation while ensuring that core themes - NGO functions, role, and NGOs-state relations - were consistently addressed across all interviews.

However, this study is based on four expert interviews with representatives of NGOs operating in veterans' reintegration. While this number is appropriate for an in-depth qualitative study, it limits the generalizability of the findings. The selected NGOs are also relatively established and visible in the public sphere, which may exclude smaller or less formal organizations that also play important roles. Regional and local

organizations were not included, as I aimed to analyze practices and approaches that are broadly representative and scalable rather than context-specific or limited to a particular area. However, future research should explore the role of local organizations, as their activities are likely shaped by distinct regional contexts and may offer unique insights into veterans' reintegration at the community level.

Although initial outreach efforts included “Принцип”, “Юридична сотня”, and “Простір Можливостей”, these organizations were ultimately excluded from the sample due to the absence of a response despite multiple contact attempts. Their exclusion introduces certain limitations that should be acknowledged.

Each of these organizations plays a distinct and valuable role in the veteran reintegration ecosystem in Ukraine. Простір Можливостей focuses primarily on preparing specialists, local communities, and businesses for the return of veterans through educational initiatives and the promotion of collective social responsibility. Принцип specializes in legal advocacy, systemic reforms, and policy development to strengthen the relationship between military personnel and the state. Юридична сотня is a key actor in defending human rights in the context of military service and creating legal reintegration mechanisms.

Excluding these organizations limits the study's coverage of two important dimensions. The exclusion of organizations such as “Принцип” and “Юридична сотня”

limits the study's ability to fully capture the role of NGOs in veterans' rights protection and institutional reintegration. These organizations work primarily on developing legal mechanisms to safeguard veterans' rights, and transforming the broader institutional environment. Without their perspective the analysis may under-represent the role of civil society actors in shaping long-term policy solutions and legal infrastructures. On the other hand, organizations such as Veteran Hub provide a wide range of services, including legal support. Furthermore, in major advocacy initiatives, such as the development of the new veterans' policy concept, these organizations collaborate with others, allowing the study to capture some of the collective experiences and perspectives through the participating NGOs.

Similarly, the exclusion of "Простір Можливостей" limits insights into the preparation of local communities and economic reintegration strategies. Their work highlights the collective dimension of reintegration, not just the individual experience, recognizing that veterans return not only to personal lives but also to workplaces, neighbourhoods, and civic spaces that must be ready to accommodate them. At the same time, interviews were conducted with representatives of Lobby X and Veteran Hub, both of which also engage with local communities to promote veterans' employment and facilitate their integration into the civilian workforce.

The choice of a directed content analysis approach enabled the deductive application of pre-existing

theoretical categories namely Müller's (2006) civil society functions and Chambers & Kopstein (2008) typology of civil society-state relations. However, a key limitation is that these frameworks do not provide clear operational definition of indicators for each category, which requires the researcher to interpret and adapt them during the coding process. Another problem is that some actions of civil society might fall outside or between predefined categories.

Moreover, although relations between NGOs and state in terms of reintegration are analysed, we only include perceptions of civil society. This presents a limitation, as the perspective of state actors is absent, making it difficult to fully capture the nature, dynamics, and reciprocity of this relationship. This may result in a partial view of the reintegration process, omitting critical feedback or alternative narratives. Veterans' comments on cooperations with NGOs are also not included. The absence of veterans' perspectives means the effectiveness of NGOs services is not evaluated from the beneficiary standpoint, which limits the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Overall, the chosen methodology provided valuable insight into the role of NGOs in veterans' reintegration in Ukraine. However, the limitations outlined above highlight the need for triangulation with additional data sources - including veterans themselves and state actors - and for future research to examine the outcomes of civil society interventions. Despite these limitations, the study offers an important foundation for understanding the function of NGOs,

as well as the evolving state-civil society connection in the context of veterans' adaptation in terms of military-to-civilian transition.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### ***5.1. Functions of NGOs in MCT***

#### ***5.1.1. Participative function***

Among the four core roles of civil society outlined by Müller (2006), the participative function emerged as the most frequently referenced in interviews with Ukrainian NGOs working on veterans' reintegration. This function - closely associated with "positive freedom" and the opportunity for individuals to shape their environment - is especially relevant in Ukraine, where traditional political institutions often fall short in capturing the needs of veterans.

Müller (2006) notes that interest groups, due to their specific focus and close engagement with communities, are often able to identify serious risks and propose meaningful solutions faster than political parties. This observation is clearly reflected in the work of Ukrainian NGOs. All the interviewed organizations actively engage in research and analysis to detect problems and understand the veteran experience in depth.

For instance, one of the many studies carried out by Veteran Hub is "Шлях коханого воїна" ("The Path of a Warrior's Beloved") (Veteran Hub, 2023), which studies the personal experience of veterans' spouses and partners during the war. Importantly, most of their research examines everyday interactions veterans have upon returning from service - ranging from family members to police officers - and identifies

key points where support is needed. As Veteran Hub respondent explained:

*“We look at how a person moves naturally after being discharged from service ... And we try to explore at those points where there are important interactions and what happens there.”*

Building on these findings, Veteran Hub developed training programs for train conductors, recognizing that while not normally identified as service providers, they are the first ones to interact with veterans after the discharge, and often spend long hours with veterans in settings and must manage sensitive or complex social interactions. This is a clear example of how research is translated into practical solutions and capacity-building for overlooked professional groups:

*“He’s not a psychologist, but in reality, these people have 12-15 hours with a veteran...in very difficult social conditions... We helped them become better service providers in what they already do, but in what they’re not identified with.”*

Other organizations exhibit similar approaches. Veteranka also mentioned research as one of their crucial directions - recently they have studied the level of satisfaction of veterans with the mental health services, intending to apply the findings to improve inner service quality. Vilnyi Vybir provided psychological education and ethical communication training to both mental health professionals and state



institutions such as IQHAI (*administrative service providers*) and local social service providers. Although funding cuts halted this initiative, the project exemplifies how NGOs proactively work to bridge service gaps.

Thus, research and analysis is used to improve the level of services provided or raise the awareness about the existing problems. At the same time, respondents from Vilniy Vybir emphasized that this is an area they aim to integrate more systematically into their work in the near future. They recognize the importance of research, as strengthening analysis capacity would not only enhance service quality but also enable more evidence-based advocacy, thus expanding the scope and impact of their activities:

*“We plan to develop our research direction... because when you have research, it becomes easier to advocate for certain interests.”*

Another way to influence obvious shortcomings is advocacy, mentioned by most respondents. One of the greatest examples is the involvement of VeteranHub and Veteranka in the development of a conceptual framework for veterans’ policy, which was formulated and publicly presented by five NGOs and was eventually adopted as a foundation for government action. Veteran Hub describes this interaction as follows:

*“... the state... immediately took up this concept at the level of the parliamentary committee, then at the level of the ministry. It really now forms the basis of state policy.”*

Beyond research and advocacy, many organizations act directly when they identify gaps unlikely to be addressed by the state. For example, respondents noted the lack of sufficient funding and institutions capacity for service provision, prompting NGOs to offer various types of support themselves. For example, in cases of discrimination or harassment - particularly involving women veterans - NGOs like Veteranka also take on roles typically expected of state institutions, providing legal assistance and emotional support:

*“For example, women who serve and who face harassment come to us... and we provide legal and psychological support that the institution should provide.”*

Additionally, NGOs contribute to awareness-raising on sensitive but crucial issues the state tends to overlook, such as sexual health and intimacy. A clear example of this dynamic is observed in the sphere of veterans’ employment, where NGOs aim to address information asymmetries and the lack of job opportunities in local communities. The respondent from Lobby X explained:

*“When a veteran returns to their community, unfortunately, there are significantly fewer career opportunities available. That is why it was important for us to go into the regions.”*

The analysis demonstrates that the participative function of Ukrainian NGOs in the sphere of veterans’ reintegration is primarily focused on two interconnected goals: detecting problems and offering solutions. As Müller (2006)

notes, interest groups - due to their narrow focus and close connection with specific communities - are often able to identify emerging issues and risks earlier than politicians. This is clearly reflected in the Ukrainian context, where NGOs actively conduct research and analysis to better understand veterans' needs and challenges.

Once a problem is identified, these organizations are quick to formulate practical responses. In some cases, they pursue advocacy efforts, presenting their findings and proposed solutions to public authorities. In others, where the state is perceived as unable or unwilling to act, NGOs step in directly - either by delivering essential services themselves or by providing training and expertise to improve public service delivery.

Müller describes this as a multi-level, decentralized approach, where civil society influences the political process without needing to operate within formal political institutions. However, in Ukraine, the participative function of civil society appears to go even further. NGOs do not limit themselves to shaping public opinion or lobbying for change - they take direct action through education, awareness-raising, and service provision. This reflects not only their responsiveness and proximity to the affected groups but also the critical gaps in state capacity, which compel civil society to serve as both a watchdog and a provider.

#### *5.1.2. Legitimizing function*

Although the interviewed NGOs did not always explicitly frame their work as building public trust in state institutions, their actions consistently reflect the essence of the legitimizing function of civil society. According to theory, this function is the ability of civil society to build public trust in political institutions by acting independently but constructively, helping the state to govern more rationally, effectively, and in accordance with the needs of citizens. In the Ukrainian context, NGOs clearly see strengthening state institutions as a central goal. *One of the most common answers among all the interviewees included the belief that services for veterans should ultimately be provided by a functional, predictable, and reliable state system, which encourages the organizations to work in cooperation with the state.*

This orientation is particularly evident in the way the VeteranHub representative talks about building institutional structures from the bottom up. As they noted:

*“We came into a sphere where there was nothing, nothing of the sort. We did what needed to be done for the people we love.”*

This quote reflects the understanding that legitimacy comes not only from existing trust, but also from creating structures that can be trusted. By developing strategies, models, and standards for service delivery, NGOs help shape a system that is transparent, responsive, and capable of functioning predictably, even before full effectiveness is achieved.

The organizations like Veteran Hub and Lobby X do not position themselves in opposition to the state; rather, they describe themselves as part of a team working toward a shared vision of a dignified and just society for veterans. This ethos of collaboration, rather than competition, strengthens the legitimacy of the state by demonstrating that political institutions are worth engaging with and investing in. Civil society here functions not as a critic standing outside the system, but as a co-creator of the democratic state, offering its experience, data and recommendations to guide the decision-making process.

Another point mentioned by most of the NGOs' representatives emphasized that recognizing the state's greater reach, stability, and responsibility, organizations aim to pass their knowledge and expertise to public actors, ensuring that services become more consistent and sustainable. As Lobby X described:

*“Because it is important for us to transfer this expertise to them and strengthen them, so that when a veteran comes to them, their expertise is of high quality... We understand that we will not be able to cover everyone. “*

Similarly, Vylnyi Vybir developed training programs and a planned handbook for frontline service providers at ЦНАПи and local social services - those who directly interact with veterans and their families. While funding interruptions affected the project, the intent underscores the broader

aspiration to institutionalize NGOs expertise within the public system:

*“We have experience that can be methodologically formalized, some basic recommendations can be derived from it, and how our experience can be useful, in particular, for the state or other entities to make decisions in this area.”*

VeteranHub reinforced this view, noting:

*“But if the state has taken what they (NGOs) know, it can use it more sustainably, perhaps in different volumes, perhaps in a different format.”*

Such statements show that civil society actors do not see a clear line between civic activism and democratic governance. Their work in building legitimacy is not only about providing external oversight or creating pressure, but also about laying the moral, institutional, and professional foundations of a reliable state.

Another way NGOs fulfill the legitimizing function is by facilitating a platform for dialogue, where veterans can communicate their needs directly to state actors. These spaces enable joint problem-solving among veterans, employers, local authorities, and public service providers. For instance, organizations make multi-stakeholder events that bring together employment centers, administrative service providers, and local governments. As one representative explained:

*“We bring together employment centers, administrative service providers (ЦХАИПу), various veteran organizations,*

*and local authorities. We create a space where everyone interested in the issue of veteran employment can come together - and that's where the magic happens."*

Such initiatives reflect the theoretical prediction that civil society contributes to democratic governance by facilitating dialogue between authorities and citizens, thereby promoting transparency, accountability, and mutual understanding. As Lobby X representative highlighted:

*"When we organize career days, we invite city councils and regional councils to participate, so they are informed, so they can hear directly from veterans... and understand the real situation in their region."*

While monitoring and public oversight are seen as core elements of civil society's legitimizing function - providing critical assessments of state performance and suggesting improvements - this role appears to be only partially visible in the practice of Ukrainian NGOs working in the veterans' reintegration sphere. Most of the organizations interviewed do not explicitly identify their activities as "monitoring". As the representative from Veteran Hub states:

*"We don't have a state (veteran) policy yet. There wasn't one, there's no one to monitor."*

This response underscores a crucial point: meaningful monitoring presupposes the existence of stable, structured, and measurable public policy (something that, in the view of many NGOs, has yet to fully materialize in the veteran sector). The

lack of a coherent and comprehensive state policy has limited civil society's capacity to evaluate implementation or outcomes systematically.

However, despite not using the language of oversight, these organizations consistently engage in activities that align with its underlying logic. Many respondents described identifying systemic gaps, reacting to superficial or fragmented reforms, and advocating for more foundational, long-term changes. For example, Veteranka referred to efforts around proposed law on gender advisors in military but noted that:

*"...because reforms are taking place there, but right now, well, they are not yet crowned with success, as nothing is getting better at the level of psychological support for the army."*

This again shows that civil society does advocate for changes, however, they do not feel like they can make a difference unless the whole system is reformed. As one respondent from *Vilnyi Vybiri* noted:

*"Now it is necessary to reform a lot of processes, make changes to a lot of resolutions, legislative actions ... This is a very long development process, which... will still require a very large amount of time."*

### *5.1.3. Integrative function*

The integrative function of civil society, as conceptualized by Müller (2006), emphasizes its role in



fostering social cohesion, collective identity, and a sense of belonging among individuals and groups. It is through repeated engagement in civic activities that people come to understand the power of solidarity and mutual support, especially when advocating for shared interests. Civil society contributes to this process by creating communities where individuals learn that even if their voices are not immediately heard or acted upon, they still have the collective strength to keep asserting their needs over time.

The interview data, particularly from Veteranka, provides a rich illustration of this dynamic. The organization explicitly invests in building and maintaining a close-knit community of women veterans, not only to provide services but to ensure that the women feel seen, heard, and supported. As the respondent describes:

*“And it’s cool, it’s just nice to live in a circle, knowing that you’re not alone...”*

This sense of belonging is transformative: it cultivates civic agency and often leads members to become active contributors themselves, offering mentorship and peer support to others. Such grassroots mentorship structures create a cycle of empowerment, where individuals who have been helped are motivated to give back, thus reinforcing the strength and continuity of the community:

*“The more they are able to take care of themselves... then they all show a desire to help other veterans.”*

The organization's efforts to develop women veteran-led businesses, and to create mechanisms to support access to service within the community, also reflect the integrative function in action. These practices reduce reliance on external actors and strengthen internal community capacity, reinforcing a shared identity and practical self-sufficiency.

Through the formation of strong internal bonds and collective confidence, these communities begin to exert social and political influence, creating solutions, and advocating for broader recognition and inclusion in public decision-making. This directly aligns with Müller's idea that integrative civil society not only brings people together, but teaches them that working collectively is key to long-term democratic change, even when institutional responses are slow or inconsistent.

On the other hand, organizations like Veteran Hub and Lobby X see their role as facilitators of institutional change and knowledge transfer, helping to shape a more responsive and effective government rather than creating long-term member-based networks.

Notably, the integrative function of civil society was most explicitly emphasized by organizations that work with a specific target group - women veterans and active-duty service-women - such as Veteranka. In contrast, organizations with a broader focus, serving all veterans, their families, and active soldiers, primarily concentrated on service delivery, advocacy, or systemic change, with less emphasis on internal community-building. This distinction may suggest that more

narrowly defined groups, particularly those who experience multiple layers of marginalization or underrepresentation, have a stronger need for safe, identity-affirming spaces where they can build solidarity and mutual support. It also reflects the reality that integration and visibility within broader veteran communities or state systems may still be limited for certain subgroups, prompting them to rely more heavily on civil society as a space of inclusion and collective strength.

#### *5.1.4. Protective function*

The protective function of civil society - traditionally understood as guarding civic space from state overreach and ensuring the autonomy of citizen action - was the least prominent role identified by the organizations interviewed. Rather than positioning themselves as watchdogs or as separate from state structures, many NGOs, particularly Veteran Hub, explicitly reject this distinction. Their representativeness emphasized that they see themselves as part of the state apparatus, working side-by-side with public institutions to address urgent gaps in veterans' policy and service provision. As the respondent put it:

*“We are the state... we just sit at the same table and work together.”*

This sentiment reflects the deep entanglement between civil society and the state in Ukraine's context, where lack of institutional capacity, personnel shortages, and ongoing war have necessitated cooperative efforts. Rather than drawing boundaries, these NGOs engage in shared ownership of solutions, even allowing the state to take credit for their

initiatives if it leads to broader policy impact. This orientation suggests that in Ukraine's case, the protective function is subsumed within a deeper cooperative logic, where civil society acts not to defend itself from the state, but to support and co-create it.

## ***5.2. State-civil society relations in terms of MCT***

### ***5.2.1. Civil society in dialogue with the state***

According to Chambers and Kopstein (2008) typology, a civil society organization is seen as operating in dialogue with the state when it engages in critical but constructive exchange through public consultations, expert engagement, or advisory roles, offering feedback and alternative perspectives, while state actors remain open and responsive. In the Ukrainian context, all of the interviewed organizations reflected elements of this dialogic relationship, although its depth and form varied.

One clear manifestation of dialogue is found in advocacy and public consultations. Organizations such as Veteranka and VetranHub have been actively involved in advocacy initiatives, most notably in co-developing a conceptual framework for national veterans' policy, which was later integrated into the official state strategy. While VeteranHub acknowledge that the final policy document reflected their proposals, they also expressed concern over the lack of structured dialogue during the drafting phase:

*“...we expected the opposition to come to us with some kind of counterargument... But... no alternative version was formed... It would have been better if this dialogue had taken place.”*

Despite these gaps, VeteranHub viewed the eventual collaboration as a constructive development, with civil society actors being invited to implement and guide aspects of the strategy. Similarly, Veteranka emphasized their participation in successful advocacy campaigns on gender advisors and access to combat roles for women, though they stressed that such incremental victories only expose deeper systemic problems, highlighting the need for broader reform:

*“...but it became clear that opening combat positions for women in the military isn’t really a victory, it’s just opening the door to a bunch of other problems.”*

Other organizations, such as Vylnyi Vybir, are in the process of formalizing this type of relationship. While they currently lack an established advocacy component, they aspire to institutionalize dialogue by transforming practical experience into evidence-based recommendations for policymakers.

Across interviews, dialogue is also seen as a strategic mechanism to scale impact, as organizations strive to share accumulated knowledge with state institutions. Organizations recognize that civil society is more agile and adaptive, capable

of piloting new approaches quickly, while the state possesses stability and reach. As Lobby X noted:

*“We have more opportunities to change quickly... Therefore, there is 100% this opportunity to share expertise, but still the foundation here should be the state.”*

This vision of dialogue is deeply mutual. NGOs view the state as an instrument of continuity, capable of embedding civil society expertise into sustainable policy frameworks:

*“The state is an instrument of immortality for our knowledge.” (Veteran Hub)*

To facilitate this transfer, many organizations maintain regular cooperation with public institutions. For example, Vilnyi Vybiri conducted training for local service providers, while Veteran Hub developed educational materials for employment centers and police forces based on their research. Lobby X worked closely with job centers, recognizing that both actors bring complementary strengths to veterans' reintegration:

*“It is very important for us to work with state service providers. Because we will not have the same capabilities as they have. They are present in every region. And this is the first point where a veteran will come after returning. But at the same time, we, as a public organization, are more flexible. We*

*have the opportunity to develop quickly and quickly increase our expertise. And we are actually useful to each other here.”*

The analysis shows that Ukrainian NGOs are active contributors to the formation of state policy, operating through dialogue-based relationships that emphasize mutual benefit. The spirit of collaboration - through advocacy, expertise-sharing, and joint implementation - is clearly evident. This dialogic relationship not only strengthens policy relevance and quality but also reflects a transformative model of state-civil society interaction, where knowledge flows both ways, and the shared goal is institutional development grounded in real needs. This positions Ukrainian civil society as both a source of innovation and a strategic partner in building a more responsive and legitimate state.

#### *5.2.2. Civil society in partnership with the state*

According to Chambers and Kopstein (2008) typology, a partnership relationship between civil society and the state exists when civil society addresses problems the state fails to act upon, either due to incapacity or lack of initiative. This often occurs when the state delegates responsibilities to NGOs, or when NGOs independently step in to fill critical gaps. This model of cooperation emerged as the second most prominent type of state-civil society relation in this research and was reflected across all interviews.

The interviewed organizations consistently expressed the belief that the services they provide - ranging from mental health support to employment assistance - should rightfully be

delivered by the state. However, in the absence of adequate state capacity, NGOs have taken responsibility for providing these services, which positions them within a partnership framework. Their responses align with theoretical predictions that civil society operates in partnership with the state when it fills gaps in service provision, either by default - where the state is absent - or through intentional delegation of responsibilities. As Lobby X respondent noted regarding regional employment access:

*“When a veteran returns to their community, unfortunately, there are significantly fewer career opportunities available. That is why it was important for us to go into the regions.”*

Even where public services technically exist, respondents emphasized that they often fail to meet veterans’ expectations or needs. For example, while employment centers offer some support, the quality is inconsistent and often inadequate:

*“Therefore, employment centers are already doing something similar, but not quite at the level that veterans would like.”*

This theme extended beyond employment. Veteranka reported that women in the military who experience harassment frequently turn to their community for legal and psychological support, though such support is expected to come from the state. Similarly, Vilnius Vybir shared that while psychological support should be institutionalized, this is not currently feasible without comprehensive systemic reforms:



*“Potentially in the distant, cool future it would be cool if the state could provide such services ... As of now, we can hardly say that the state can close these services.”*

Veteran Hub went even further, arguing that their very existence is a consequence of the state’s failure to establish a coherent veterans’ policy. As explained by the representative, the existing legislation, inherited from the Soviet period and barely modernized since 1993, remains disconnected from the lived experiences of contemporary Ukrainian veterans. In their words:

*“The Veteran Hub, as a space for veterans, emerged as a consequence of a non-existent system. When the system works, a veteran won’t need a Veteran Hub.”*

What sets the Ukrainian case apart is that this partnership did not emerge from delegation, but from a structural void. Civil society organizations didn’t merely fill existing gaps - they have been actively building the system itself. As veteran Hub emphasized:

*“I didn’t have the experience of someone doing something for me. We came into a realm where there was nothing, nothing... We did what needed to be done for the people we love, for the people we care about.”*

The strength of this integrative partnership is such that some organizations, particularly Veteran Hub, no longer see a boundary between themselves and the state. Their

representative describes the organization as “part of the team” responsible for developing the country’s veteran support infrastructure:

*“Now there is no public sector and the state, as in Western countries. We just sit at the same table and work together.”*

*“I think we are a state.”*

This reflects a unique model of partnership, rooted not only in necessary but in a shared project of state-building. The fact that most organizations interviewed were founded after 2014 underscored this point. Their emergence was a direct response to institutional failure, and over time, some evolved into co-architects of Ukraine’s veterans’ policy and service landscape.

Interestingly, public initiatives openly recognize their temporary role in an area that should be systematically provided by the state. Representatives of Veteran Hub, Vilnyi Vybiri, and Lobby X share a common understanding: the services they currently provide should be part of a functioning state policy. They do not position themselves as a permanent alternative, but as temporary carriers of knowledge, practices, and solutions that are gradually transferred to state institutions. As Lobby X noted:

*“I believe that the state should do this. It should not be done by public organizations.”*

This response clearly shows the understanding that an organization like Veteran Hub exists solely due to the structural absence of a state veteran support system. The respondent recognizes that the organization performs a transitional function - it was created to fill a vacuum, and its ultimate goal is to become unnecessary when the system begins to work independently:

*“My opinion is that the veteran hub, in the end, should disappear. We once thought it would take 10 years. Obviously, more. But the veteran hub, as a space for veterans, appeared as a consequence of a non-existent system. When the system works, the veteran will not need the veteran hub.”*

They see their task as helping the state build a system that can function without the civil sector in certain areas. This partnership is not situational, but systemic and focused on the transfer of powers and functions.

In summary, the partnership between Ukrainian civil society organizations and the state in the veterans' sector reflects a unique and deeply collaborative model, shaped not by delegation, but by necessity. Rather than functioning as parallel structures, these organizations have assumed a transitional role - filling systemic voids while actively contributing to the construction of a future in which their presence is no longer required. Their work is not aimed at replacing the state, but at preparing it to assume full responsibility through the transfer of expertise and policy frameworks. This form of partnership is not merely reactive -

it is strategic, generative, and state-building in nature, highlighting civil society's evolving role as both a service provider and co-architect of institutional transformation.

#### *5.2.3. Civil society in support of the state*

The “in support of the state” relationship, as defined by Chambers and Kopstein (2008), reflects civil society's role in fostering democratic norms, civic identity, and shared values. In the Ukrainian context, this function is especially visible in organizations like Veteranka, which emphasized building a supportive, inclusive community of women veterans, where mutual understanding, voice, and belonging are central. As one respondent explained:

*“But what the community gives us even more is influence.”*

These interactions - whether through peer gatherings, opportunities to speak out, or simply the reassurance that you are not alone - help to form a collective civic identity rooted in solidarity and shared lived experiences. Vilnyi Vybir also sees civil society as something that unites people around a shared idea and mission:

*“These are people who unite around some idea, and this idea is common to them.”*

#### *5.2.4. Civil society apart from the state*

While most interviewed organizations actively seek cooperation with the state, certain responses from Veteranka

and Vilnyi Vybir reveal moments of functional or strategic distancing, which reflects only some traits of the “apart from the state” type of relationship. According to Chambers and Kopstein (2008), this type emerges when civil society operates autonomously within the constitutional order, with no meaningful collaboration or interference from the state. Veteranka, for instance, described how attempts to conduct research in coordination with the Ministry of Defence were effectively blocked - data was withheld. As a result, the organization shifted its focus to internal research for its own operational needs, citing a lack of institutional interest or access to reliable data:

*“We could do more, but no one needs it.”*

Similarly, Vilnyi Vybir expressed skepticism toward engaging with the state under current conditions. When offered formal cooperation under an existing government regulation, they declined due to the excessive bureaucratic burden, lack of flexibility, and absence of guarantees:

*“...with the amount of bureaucracy that will be imposed on the organization with the adoption of these norms, rules and everything else, we will slow down a lot.”*

These examples do not suggest complete isolation, as both organizations maintain selective forms of engagement. However, they reflect a growing operational autonomy rooted in institutional distrust and ineffective channels of cooperation. This positions them, at times, on the margins of state

interaction operating apart from the state in practice, even if not in principle.

#### *5.2.5. Civil society against the state*

NGOs that explicitly position themselves as being *against the state* were not identified. None of them clearly represent the civil society against the state type as defined by Chamber and Kopstein (2008) - where civil society openly resists or opposes state authority through protests, confrontations, or active public criticism. Some respondents did mention frustration with the current leadership's inability to implement necessary reforms, but mostly they express a desire for future collaboration and a belief that the state should ultimately take responsibility. Therefore, these cases are better categorized under the "civil society in dialogue with the state" or "civil society apart from the state", depending on the specific context.

### *5.3. The role of civil society in MCT*

When asked about their role in the military-to-civilian transition of veterans, all interviewed organizations shared a remarkably aligned vision. Thus, I was able to highlight three major roles that they aspire to accomplish: strengthening the state's actions in veterans' support, filling the gaps where the state fails to provide necessary support, and community building.

The first task they see themselves destined to accomplish is to **strengthen the state's actions in veterans' support**. This commitment is rooted in a shared understanding that veteran reintegration services should ultimately be delivered by state institutions. However, in the absence of a comprehensive and responsive system, civil society has stepped in - not only to provide immediate support, but also to develop and pass on the expertise necessary for sustainable state solutions. As a representative from Lobby X put it:

*"I believe that the state should do this. Public organizations shouldn't be doing this... And this is not only about our direction, it is about the various services that public organizations currently provide for veterans."*

Similarly, Veteranka stressed that NGOs often take on more than they should:

*"This is not okay. I would still like to avoid politics being driven by NGOs."*

NGOs frame their role as transitional and strategic. They act quickly, flexibly, and creatively, using their comparative advantage to identify needs, pilot solutions, and develop methodologies that can be scaled by the state. As Vylniy Vybiri explained, NGOs can respond to challenges faster and more proactively due to their lower bureaucratic burden:

*“In general, what makes the public sector so great? It’s great because it can respond much faster to emerging challenges than the state. In fact, it’s also about the lower level of this bureaucracy, the high flexibility, adaptability, and such proactivity in the process.”*

However, they also recognize that the state holds the institutional stability, legitimacy, and geographical coverage necessary for sustainable delivery - which is why strengthening the state through knowledge transfer is a key priority. As Lobby X stated:

*“We understand that we won’t be able to cover everyone. And we don’t have the capacity to cover everyone yet, so we are sharing our expertise with the state...”*

Veteran Hub offers a unique perspective by positioning themselves not only as experts who pass knowledge, but also as a co-creator of the system. They described their work as filling a void where no formal structure existed. They see their role in being an active participant in building the state veterans’ support system, which they believe did not exist before. It goes beyond simple strengthening of the state with the expertise, but includes institution building and policy formulation as they take part in the creation of a state-run, veteran-centered system that reflects the lessons and innovations developed in civil society:



*“And, actually, our efforts now with the strategy are aimed at introducing this manageability, introducing this predictability and some kind of framework for the system.”*

A second major role emphasized by all organizations relates to the functional and structural differences between NGOs and state institutions. While the state is often overburdened, slow, and impersonal, NGOs retain the flexibility and capacity to provide personalized, comprehensive support. Thus, they see their task in **filling the gaps with the issues that the state is unwilling or unprepared to tackle** - such as sex education or gender-based violence. For example, Lobby X explains that they can provide the high-quality services that the state is still incapable to do because of its structural complexity:

*“... maybe they (Employment Centers) want to provide such services, ... a very personalized approach, this kind of coaching, but there is not yet such a capacity to transfer all the employment centers there to such a level.”*

Veteran Hub also sees its role in addressing the issues that the state overlooks, as topics like sex might not seem a number one priority to be studied by public institutions:

*“And the further we go, the more we see our role in covering up those issues that the state will not soon or ever address. The issue of sex is one of these issues.”*

Another example is that most organizations highlighted the individualized approach to service provision and research

that NGOs can offer because they have more freedom and time than the state. For example, Veteran Hub points out the importance of the principle of human-centeredness - while the state sees the system through the lens of providers, NGOs work from lived experiences of veterans. The people-first approach allows NGOs to identify practical gaps and respond to veterans' needs more directly and sensitively. Vilniy Vybir and Lobby X also point out personal satisfaction of a single client as their main priority in terms of service delivery.

The Veteran Hub highlights that the state, due to its structural constraints and excessive workload, is simply unable to offer the level of individualized care that many veterans require. However, these needs remain, and civil society organizations are stepping in to fill this gap, using their flexibility and people-centered approach to provide the support that the state is unable to provide.

Finally, several organizations emphasized the importance of **community-building** as a key part of their reintegration aspirations. Both Veteranka and Vilniy Vybir view community as a space of healing, empowerment, and civic participation. As Veteranka explained:

*“The more they are able to take care of themselves ... they all show a desire to help other veterans.”*

These communities foster peer support, shared identity, and long-term engagement:

*“The public sector is ... about some ideological component. These are people who gather around some idea, and this idea is common to them.” (Vilniy Vybir)*

In conclusion, Ukrainian NGOs play a multifaceted role in veterans’ reintegration from military to civilian life. They serve as experts, service providers, policy innovators, and community builders. While they do not seek to replace the state, they are deeply involved in shaping what the state’s role should eventually be. Their work fills immediate gaps and lays the foundation for a future in which veterans can rely on a state system that is responsive, inclusive, and built on the insights civil society has brought to light.

## **KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The study aimed to figure out the role of Ukrainian civil society (in particular, NGOs) in veterans' reintegration through the exploration of their main functions, activity in relation to the state, and their own perception of the place in MCT. All three research questions proved to be deeply interconnected and revealed clear and consistent patterns. Applying Müller's (2006) theoretical framework, it became evident that most NGOs engaged in veterans' reintegration performing primarily participative and legitimizing functions. They are actively involved in detecting problems, offering practical and evidence-based solutions, and contributing to the formation of a transparent, and effective system of veteran support. These functional roles closely align with the relationship types identified through Chamber and Koptein's (2008) typology, where the majority of organizations placed themselves in dialogue or partnership with the state.

The analysis of how NGOs perceive their own role in military-to-civilian transition (MCT) only reinforces these findings. Across interviews, NGOs consistently described their work as twofold: strengthening the state's capacity in veterans' support and filling the gaps in veteran's support. They clearly recognize institutional weaknesses in the state system - such as the absence of research, lack of coordinated policy, outdated legislation, and poor accessibility of services - and act strategically to address these deficiencies. Their interventions

are grounded in a sense of necessity, not rivalry. Some organizations were, in fact, created as a direct response to these systemic voids.

My findings corroborate with earlier research by Zarembo (2017) and Kryshchapovych (2016), which similarly highlight how the Ukrainian volunteer movement emerged as both supplements and substitutes for the state in times of crisis. Like Kryshchapovych's account of volunteers carving out space within the MoD, my research confirms that institutional engagement was not always granted but had to be claimed through persistent civil pressure. Moreover, the findings also align with Zarembo's observations that civil society increasingly took on complex roles, particularly where state capacity remained weak or underdeveloped. This confirms a broader pattern in which Ukrainian NGOs evolve not merely to support the state, but to compensate for its structural deficiencies.

Crucially, Ukrainian NGOs do not seek to replace the state. They describe their actions as transitional and cooperative. Acknowledging their agility, adaptability, and proximity to target groups, NGOs use their comparative advantage to pilot support programs, gather data, and transfer insights to state actors. This strategy is future-oriented: the goal is to help build a capable and legitimate system that will one day make their direct involvement unnecessary. Veteran Hub, for example, explicitly frames its own eventual disappearance as a marker of success - a sign that the state system is effectively functioning. Therefore, In Ukraine's veteran

reintegration, civil society is an integral part of the governance ecosystem, and they see their relations with the state as collaborative. It shows that in conditions of war and institutional weakness, civil society may serve as a transitional mechanism, helping to build the very state capacity that is missing.

While these two roles dominated across most organizations, community-building was also essential for the organization Veteranka. Such a role resonates to the integrative function, as proposed by Müller (2006). This reinforces the idea that more marginalized or less visible groups often rely more heavily on civil society to affirm identity and collective strength.

In the Ukrainian context, protective position from the state in terms of veterans' support is largely subsumed within a broader cooperative logic. NGOs are not shielding civil society from state overreach; instead, they are co-producing the policies and systems that define state legitimacy. The line between civil and public actors is often blurred. This is not only due to shared goals but also due to the historical reality that NGOs' appearance in this sphere stemmed from the lack of a sufficient system.

For national policy, the implications are clear: the involvement of civil society must be seen as a vital part of state-building. Since 2014, the comprehensive and effective state veterans' support system has been missing, and civil society has been the one actively engaged in its creation.

Policymakers should recognize that institutionalizing this collaboration is essential through formal councils or advisory bodies under the Ministry of Veterans Affairs to ensure structured and continuous consultation.

Thus, Ukrainian NGOs play an essential, forward-looking role in veterans' military-to-civilian transition. They operate as bridge-builders between current needs and future systems - filling critical service gaps today while laying the groundwork for a more responsive, legitimate, and humane state tomorrow. Rather than existing in competition with the state, they act as co-creators of public infrastructure, contributing to the very understanding of what reintegration should look like in a democratic and inclusive Ukraine.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK**

Many scholars have previously tried to come up with a theoretical framework to better understand and find appropriate ways to support service personnel in making successful transitions to civilian life because while many soldiers quite easily came back to their pre-war life, others faced difficulties with reintegration.

A growing body of research on veterans' reintegration has focused on the role of culture in MCT. Scholars like Beverly Bergman (2014) and Linda Cooper (2016) study the influence of culture on the process of leaving the military environment and transferring to a different (previously familiar) social context, and highlight the important role of government, businesses, and local communities in this process. For example, the cultivation of cultural competence and civilian life skills could be provided by personal skills programs, as well as through work placement. Both works share one common idea – the importance of reintegration of military personnel, which can be provided by the engagement of efforts from NGOs, local communities, businesses, and government, as they are the ones that can put veterans in a new cultural context.

However, the literature mostly documents the mental and physical outcomes of deploying to war, and challenges arising during MCT; however, there are few studies that show mechanisms for the provision of a successful transition. Many of the previously mentioned papers highlight the importance of local communities, businesses, and NGOs in



MCT. On the other hand, there has been a lack of focus on the role, power, and participation of NGOs in the reintegration of veterans.

This study has contributed to the field providing empirical evidence of the role of NGOs in veterans' MCT. This study set out to explore how Ukrainian NGOs contribute to the MCT of veterans, using the theoretical lenses of Müller's typology of civil society functions and Chambers and Kopstein's classification of state-civil society relations. The findings demonstrate that Ukrainian NGOs perform a broad and strategic role in this process, primarily by filling the gaps in state's activity and strengthening state's capacity. They identify problems within the veterans' support system, develop and propose practical solutions, and actively pass on their knowledge to state institutions in the hope of shaping a more responsive and sustainable public policy infrastructure.

While the theoretical frameworks anticipated that civil society will sometimes act in opposition to state overreach, the Ukrainian context reveals a different reality. Instead of maintaining distance or resisting the state, NGOs in this field are deeply embedded in its development. In fact, they were formed precisely because the state lacked the capacity to provide adequate support to veterans. This resulted in a form of cooperation that goes beyond the scope of existing theory. Rather than simply advocating for change or monitoring the government, Ukrainian NGOs are actively involved in building institutional frameworks, drafting conceptual policies, and

delivering foundational services. In essence, they function as co-creators of the state's veteran support infrastructure.

From an academic standpoint, the research contributes evidence that conditions of war and institutional weakness may foster higher collaborative state-civil society dynamics. The case of Ukraine shows that the cooperative model, born of necessity, suggests an improvement to civil society theory: under extreme conditions civil society may serve as a transitional mechanism, actively constructing the very state capacity that is lacking.

On the other hand, this study focused exclusively on the perspective of civil society actors, offering insights into how NGOs perceive and perform their role in the MCT. However, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of state-civil society dynamics, future research should also incorporate the views of state representatives involved in veterans' reintegration. Additionally, while the study outlines the range of activities undertaken by Ukrainian NGOs to support veterans, it does not assess the effectiveness or impact of these interventions. To address this gap further research should engage directly with veterans themselves, particularly those who have interacted with NGOs, in order to evaluate the perceived relevance, accessibility, and outcomes of civil society-led reintegration efforts. Such a perspective would offer a more comprehensive evaluation of both the strengths and limitations of NGO involvements in the MCT process.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study underscore a collaborative dynamic between civil society and the state in Ukraine's military-to-civilian transition of war veterans. Given these insights, this chapter outlines evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at the Ministry of Veterans Affairs. The emphasis is on steps for institutional improvement, capacity building, and enhanced partnerships, with focus on clarifying roles, institutionalizing knowledge transfer.

There is an obvious need to formalize state-civil society dialogue and coordination. The Ministry of Veterans Affairs should establish structured platforms for regular consultations and partnership with veteran-focused NGOs. While informal dialogue exists, NGOs still perceive state cooperation in delivering veteran support as inadequate and seek a more collaborative approach. Formal mechanisms such as advisory councils, joint working groups, or public forums would institutionalize participative input from NGOs into policymaking. By recognizing NGOs as legitimate stakeholders in policy design, the Ministry can ensure that programs reflect on-the-ground realities and veteran needs, thereby enhancing the relevance and credibility of veteran reintegration policies.

The government should also prioritize building the Ministry's capacity to coordinate veteran services at scale, while also leveraging the expertise that NGOs have developed in service delivery through information-sharing and joint training. Regular knowledge-transfer workshops should be

held, inviting NGOs practitioners to share best practices in areas where they have effectively filled gaps. This flow of expertise would professionalize the state's approach and institutionalize the lessons of NGOs projects into national programs.

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## ANNEX I. Interview questionnaire

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### Part 1. Warm-up question

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|--|--|
| 1. Could you briefly introduce your organization and its mission?  | 1. Чи могли б ви коротко представити вашу організацію та її місію? |
| 2. When and why did your organization start working with veterans? | 2. Коли і чому ваша організація почала працювати з ветеранами?     |
- 

### Part 2. The functions

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 3. What services do you provide to veterans (e.g., employment, psychosocial support, legal assistance)? Do you work in any specific area? | 3. Які саме послуги ви надаєте ветеранам (наприклад, працевлаштування, психосоціальна підтримка, юридична допомога)? Чи працюєте в якомусь конкретному напрямку? |
| 4. In your opinion, how do these services affect the process of their adaptation to civilian life?  |  |

5. Do you implement initiatives to raise awareness of the society or specific communities about the problems faced by veterans?
  6. Do you have experience in advocacy work - attempts to influence policies or legislation in the field of veterans' reintegration? If yes, can you give a specific example of a successful initiative?
  7. Do you involve veterans themselves in the formation of programs or advocacy initiatives?
  8. Does your organization analyze the effectiveness of the state policies in the field of veteran support? If so, how exactly does this happen at the organizational level?
  9. Have you identified gaps or inefficiencies in state efforts to support veterans?
  10. Does your organization conduct research, and do you rely on scientific evidence in your work with veterans?
  11. How exactly do you use this data - to improve your work or for advocacy and reporting to the state/public?
4. На вашу думку, як ці послуги впливають на процес їхньої адаптації до цивільного життя?
  5. Чи реалізуєте ви ініціативи у напрямку підвищення обізнаність суспільства або конкретних спільнот щодо проблем, з якими стикаються ветерани?
  6. Чи маєте ви досвід адвокаційної роботи - спроби впливу на політики або законодавство у сфері ветеранів? Можете навести конкретний приклад успішної ініціативи?
  7. Чи залучаєте ви самих ветеранів до формування програм або адвокаційних ініціатив?
  8. Чи аналізує ваша організація, наскільки ефективно держава реалізує політики у сфері підтримки ветеранів? Якщо так, як саме це відбувається на рівні організації?
  9. Чи виявили ви прогалини або неефективність у державних зусиллях щодо підтримки ветеранів?
  10. Чи проводить ваша організація дослідження та чи спираєтеся ви на наукові дані у своїй роботі з ветеранами?
  11. Як саме ви використовуєте ці дані - для покращення своєї

роботи чи для адвокації та  
донесення до  
держави/громадськості?

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### **Part 3. The role**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>12. What role, in your opinion, does the organization play in the military-civilian transition process? How do you see the role of civil society in the reintegration of veterans in five years?</p> <p>13. How do you assess the trust in the organization by veterans and their families? Why do they turn to you?</p> <p>14. Does your organization have significant successes or important achievements that you could share specifically in the area of adaptation assistance?</p> | <p>12. Яку роль, на вашу думку, відіграє ваша організація у процесі військово-цивільного переходу? Як ви бачите роль громадянського суспільства у процесі реінтеграції ветеранів через п'ять років?</p> <p>13. Як ви оцінюєте довіру до організації з боку ветеранів та їхніх родин? Чому вони звертаються саме до вас?</p> <p>14. Чи є у вашої організації значні успіхи або важливі досягнення, якими ви могли б поділитися саме у сфері допомоги в адаптації?</p> |
|--|--|

#### **Part 4. The coordination (state's role as well as the extent of cooperation)**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>15. Is there cooperation or a general relationship between your organization and government agencies? What is it?</p> <p>16. In your opinion, how important a role does civil society play in the military-civilian transition compared to the state sector in Ukraine today?</p> <p>17. Do you see your activities as complementing, reinforcing, or replacing state efforts in the field of veteran adaptation?</p> <p>18. Is it possible to replace the activities of civil society organizations with state programs?</p> <p>19. Does the state adopt the experience and initiatives of civil society organizations?</p> | <p>15. Чи існує співпраця або в цілому зв'язок між вашою організацією та державними установами? Яка вона?</p> <p>16. На вашу думку, наскільки важливу роль відіграє громадянське суспільство у військово-цивільному переході порівняно з державним сектором в Україні сьогодні?</p> <p>17. Ви розглядаєте свою діяльність як доповнення, підсилення чи заміну державних зусиль у сфері адаптації ветеранів?</p> <p>18. Чи можливо замінити діяльність громадських організацій державними програмами?</p> <p>19. Чи держава переймає досвід та ініціативи громадських організацій?</p> |
|---|---|

## ANNEX II. Codebook

Category	2d level code	Summary of content included in 1st level codes
<b>Functions of NGOs in MCT</b>		
<b>Protective</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• monitoring and public oversight ensuring democratic principles are upheld</li> </ul>
<b>Participative</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• advocacy and awareness-raising to communicate the offered solutions to the government</li> <li>• research and analysis to detect shortcomings and offer their solutions</li> <li>• service provision, when NGOs deliver essential services, supplementing state efforts</li> </ul>
<b>Legitimizing</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• monitoring and public oversight to see if state actions align with the actual needs of the group</li> <li>• awareness raising as expertise sharing</li> </ul>
<b>Integrative</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• community building efforts</li> </ul>
<b>State-civil society relations in MCT</b>		
<b>against the state</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• civil society openly resists or opposes state authority</li> </ul>
<b>apart from the state</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• skepticism toward engaging with the state in cooperation</li> </ul>
<b>in dialogue with the state</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• advocacy initiatives (offering a conceptual framework or advocacy campaigns on gender advisors)</li> </ul>



Category	2d level code	Summary of content included in 1st level codes
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cooperation with public institutions through expertise-sharing (trainings, educational materials)</li> </ul>
<b>in partnership with the state</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>services they provide should be delivered by the state</li> <li>NGOs have taken responsibility for providing these services</li> <li>filling the gaps in service provision by default or through intentional delegation</li> <li>state's failure to establish a coherent veterans' policy</li> </ul>
<b>in support of the state</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>building a supportive, inclusive community of women</li> <li><i>"community gives us even more influence"</i></li> </ul>
<b>The role of civil society in MCT</b>		
<b>Sharing expertise with the state</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cooperation with public institutions through expertise-sharing (trainings, educational materials)</li> <li>reintegration services should ultimately be delivered by state institutions</li> <li>develop and pass on the expertise necessary for sustainable state solutions</li> <li>NGOs can respond to challenged faster</li> <li>the state holds the institutional stability</li> <li>building the state veterans' support system</li> </ul>
<b>Filling the gaps in veterans' support</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the state is often overburdened, slow, and impersonal</li> <li>NGOs retain the flexibility</li> </ul>

Category	2d level code	Summary of content included in 1st level codes
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• filling the gaps with the issues that the state cannot address</li> <li>• Individualized approach and the principle of human-centeredness</li> <li>• structural constraints and excessive workload of the state</li> </ul>
<b>Community-building</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• community as a space of healing, empowerment, and civic participation</li> </ul>