

MULTILEVEL SOCIAL ADAPTATION OF UKRAINIAN MILITARY PERSONNEL: STRUCTURAL INDICATORS AND INTEGRATION BARRIERS

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INTRODUCTION

Researching the social adaptation of Ukrainian military personnel, along with its indicators and manifestation levels, is critical for developing effective tools to reintegrate combatants into civilian life. The Russo-Ukrainian war has created an unprecedented category of veterans in Ukraine, both in terms of scale and depth of traumatic experience. A unique feature of this group is that a significant proportion of its members were civilians who were mobilised into the Armed Forces of Ukraine with no prior military experience. The sudden transition from a peaceful life to extreme combat conditions, followed by prolonged exposure to the limits of one's psychophysiological capabilities, can fundamentally alter the personality, value systems and behavioural patterns of military personnel. Returning from a combat zone involves a sharp collision with civilian reality, which the fighters often perceive as indifferent, bureaucratic or incapable of understanding their experience. Without proper scientific guidance, this gap in values and communication can trigger a deep identity crisis, exacerbate post-traumatic stress disorder and increase conflict within families and workplaces. Researching specific indicators (medico-psychological, communicative and everyday life factors) enables us to deconstruct this complex process and move away from low-efficiency approaches. Assessing the levels at which adaptation is manifested – ranging from high (successful self-actualisation in professional and social life) to maladaptive (destructive behaviour and isolation) – holds crucial practical value. This enables social workers, psychologists and government agencies to diagnose crises early and provide targeted support.

Instead of universal programs that fail to account for individual specifics (such as experience with injuries, captivity, or extended rotations), clearly defined manifestation levels of adaptation allow for the creation of targeted support pathways. Ultimately, this research is fundamentally vital for maintaining the stability of the entire Ukrainian society. Today, veterans are not just a vulnerable group requiring welfare benefits, but the country's most powerful human and social capital. The optimal social adaptation of military personnel minimizes overall social tension, reduces crime rates, and lays a solid psychological foundation for the reconstruction of the state. Systematically studying this topic transforms chaotic volunteer and state initiatives into a unified, scientifically grounded, and nationally adapted strategy for veteran policy.

The aim of the study is to investigate the social adaptation of Ukrainian military personnel as a multi-level process, analyse the structure of the resulting "adaptive conflict" at the intersection of subjective well-being and objective status, and determine the specific aspects of veteran integration within educational, professional, and family spheres.

1. The Concept of Post-Military Social Adaptation: Theoretical Framework and Typology

In sociological discourse, social adaptation is considered both a dynamic process and the result of individuals, social groups or communities adjusting to internal and external changes in society. However, when researching the life courses of combatants, the traditional understanding of adaptation needs to be significantly refined due to the unique nature of their experience. When considering the return of military personnel from a combat zone, the concept of social readaptation is fundamental. It describes a consistent pattern: after serving in the military or participating directly in combat operations, individuals must repeatedly adjust to civilian life. This stage is mandatory even if the individual adapted successfully to civilian life prior to mobilisation or enlistment. Post-military social adaptation is a multidimensional, non-linear process of a veteran's reintegration into civilian society, involving the structural, psychological, and behavioural re-alignment of an individual across social-domestic, professional, and educational contexts¹. It is characterized by the transformation of military identity into a civilian framework, the negotiation of internal values against a shifting objective social status, and the eventual mastery of the new socio-institutional environment.

In order to understand the process of social adaptation among military personnel, it is helpful to apply H. Esser's classification of adaptation stages², which views integration and adaptation as a multi-level process comprising four key dimensions:

- Acculturation (cultural integration). In the context of veterans, this is the process of demilitarising one's consciousness, acquiring new "civilian" knowledge, internalising updated cultural standards and developing the competencies required for a successful life in a peaceful society. The primary indicator of success at this stage is consciously accepting the socio-cultural values and norms of the new (or war-transformed) civilian environment.
- Placement (structural integration): This aspect presupposes that the demobilised service member successfully secures a legitimate position within the social hierarchy, obtaining or restoring their rights and capital in educational and economic contexts. The objective indicator here is stable placement of the veteran within the educational or occupational sphere (employment, retraining or entrepreneurship).
- Interaction (interactive integration): This dimension governs the restoration and construction of the combatant's social networks. Indicators of successful interactive adaptation include overcoming communicative isolation, forming or renewing close relationships (whether friendly, romantic or marital) with others, and becoming an active member of new civilian social groups and organisations.
- Identification (identificational integration): This is the subtlest and deepest level of readjustment, reflecting the individual's emotional and mental identification with the social system as a whole or its specific elements. This aspect is indicated by overcoming internal alienation and achieving successful psychological identification with the new civilian society, where the military experience is integrated into the personality structure as an important, yet concluded, biographical chapter.

¹ Bataeva E., Artemenko A. Methodological Aspects of Measuring Levels of Veterans' Social Adaptation. *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, vol. 14, 2020, pp. 655-660.

² Esser H. Migration, Language and Integration. AKI Research Review 4. Programme on Intercultural Conflicts and Societal Integration (AKI). Social Science Research Center Berlin, 2006.

Thus, Hartmut Esser's theoretical framework enables the social reintegration of Ukrainian military personnel to be analysed as a multilevel system rather than a linear phenomenon. Disruption at one of these levels (e.g. in the spheres of interaction or identification) can hinder a veteran's overall integration into society, even if they are successfully placed in a job.

In contemporary sociology, social adaptation is regarded as an active process whereby the individual adjusts to the surrounding community through various social means, assimilating its rules, norms, experiences and values. The framework for evaluating the social adaptation of military personnel can be structured around a comprehensive taxonomy of integration levels, analyzed through both objective and subjective metrics:

1. High level: Characterized by robust psycho-emotional stability, a high sense of self-efficacy, and successful structural integration. This level is manifested through complete job satisfaction, socio-economic well-being, stable family dynamics, high professional productivity, and active civic engagement.

2. Moderate level: Defined by partial or inconsistent adaptation, where a combat veteran achieves basic structural positioning (such as securing employment or education) but continues to experience internal values friction or minor role ambiguity while balancing military and civilian identities.

3. Low level (maladaptation): Marked by a systemic failure to reintegrate, which manifests as severe psycho-somatic distress, chronic anxiety, depression, a profound sense of alienation, and structural displacement within the civilian environment.

An analysis of the post-military transition process reveals three distinct phases of social adaptation: (1) anticipatory adaptation, which occurs prior to demobilisation; (2) primary structural repositioning, centred on career re-profiling and occupational selection; and (3) secondary professional socialisation, defined by mastering the chosen civilian field. Throughout this process, continuous integration requires a robust socio-institutional framework. For example, if a combat veteran receives adequate systemic support during the anticipatory and repositioning phases, but not during the secondary socialisation phase, the overall process of social adaptation will be fragmented and incomplete.

Military personnel can find themselves in a socially vulnerable group upon discharge from military service, as they are still of working age but find it difficult to secure new employment. Firstly, they have virtually no experience of civilian work, which is important to employers. Secondly, the labour market is highly competitive and difficult to adapt to without relevant experience. Thirdly, military personnel's psychological state and qualifications may not meet the psychological or social requirements of a new job. These problems can result in significant life changes for service members, such as facing internal struggles and difficulties in relationships with loved ones. The key task for the state and society is to implement measures to help those discharged from military service and their families reintegrate into society. Many former military personnel struggle to adapt to their new living conditions after leaving the army, which can lead to problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse, unemployment, anti-social behaviour and divorce. Service members need support from their immediate circle during all stages of social adaptation.

The social adaptation of military personnel is a complex, multidimensional process that unfolds simultaneously across social, domestic, professional and interpersonal contexts. Transitioning from military service to civilian life presents profound psychological challenges that affect not only the individual service members, but also their entire families.

This process is shaped by the interplay of shifting core values, changing social status and the pressure of navigating significant life changes. A key source of tension during this period is the contrast between deeply ingrained military habits and the demands of civilian life. Service members often possess highly developed traits such as rigid discipline, exceptional integrity, and a strong preference for hierarchical order. While these qualities are vital for military survival and cohesion, they can inadvertently cause conflict in civilian life. Civilian environments often require traits that may have been suppressed or underdeveloped during service, such as individual autonomy, spontaneous decision-making and unstructured creativity. Consequently, veterans must undergo a difficult internal transformation, learning to re-evaluate their identity and balance these contrasting behavioural patterns. Ultimately, this adaptation must be considered both an ongoing developmental process and a structural outcome. The quality of this outcome is determined by a complex mix of socio-psychological, professional, and socio-demographic factors. Depending on how successfully individuals master the distinct components of their new environment, such as securing employment, entering higher education, and rebuilding social networks, the final result can be categorised as low, medium, or high levels of overall social integration.

Let us consider the research into the barriers to social readjustment experienced by military personnel. As I. Guzenko points out, it is precisely in combat conditions that service personnel experience intense emotions, which can negatively impact their ability to adapt to civilian life. Situations involving heightened threats or risks to their lives can have a very negative effect on service personnel. The extreme conditions of military service can trigger various states in service personnel, such as fear, loneliness, exhaustion, distrust of society, deviant behaviour and depressive states, which may manifest as hysteria, anxiety, low self-esteem, despondency and suicidal thoughts. Among military personnel, these behaviours may manifest as “alcohol and drug abuse, breaches of military discipline, attempted suicide, and deviations in sexual behavior”³. Furthermore, 33.3% of service personnel abuse drugs and medicines to alleviate post-traumatic symptoms⁴.

According to M. Humenna, service members taking part in combat operations cannot avoid extreme situations, but must adapt to them. When a combatant returns to civilian life, certain behavioural changes may be observed that are linked to psychological trauma, which could lead to more serious problems in the future⁵. R. Sokolovsky’s analysis of the psychological state of military personnel identified the main negative psychological factors faced by combatants: “excessive responsibility, the loss of comrades, extreme danger, stress, and a lack of information and time”⁶. The greatest impact on the psychological state of

³ Гузенко І. М. Екстремальні психічні стани військовослужбовців у бойових умовах. Особистість в екстремальних умовах. Матеріали VIII Всеукраїнської науково-практичної конференції. Львів, 2017. 12–14

⁴ Мушкевич М. І. (ред.) Психологічна допомога учасникам АТО та їх сім’ям. Луцьк: Вежа-Друк, 2016

⁵ Гуменна М. В. Екстремальні ситуації як психологічний фактор впливу на військовослужбовців. Особистість в екстремальних умовах. Матеріали VIII Всеукраїнської науково-практичної конференції. Львів, 2017, с.14–16.

⁶ Соколовський Р. В. Практичний досвід фіксування змін поведінки військовослужбовців у екстремальних ситуаціях АТО. Особистість в екстремальних умовах. Матеріали VIII Всеукраїнської науково-практичної конференції. Львів, 2017, с.42–45.

combatants is caused by the injury or death of comrades, which may affect their subsequent adaptation to civilian life following demobilisation.

The social reintegration of combatants occurs when demobilised combatants return to civilian employment. Former combatants are not prepared to return to the work they did prior to their military service or involvement in military operations as a result of significant changes to their mental state. While the state guarantees that military personnel will retain their jobs, questions arise as to whether combatants are prepared to return to their previous workplace⁷. One factor that negatively affects the social reintegration of military personnel is that society is not prepared to accept them upon their return from the army. When approaching employment centres, military personnel encounter various issues. Firstly, staff at these centres lack experience in working with this group, yet a specialised approach is required. Secondly, combat veterans who have returned with a disability may react aggressively to the jobs offered to them as they believe that they will find it difficult to work due to the physical or psychological demands of the job. Before undergoing vocational rehabilitation, combatants must first undergo socio-psychological rehabilitation to restore their ability to work and prevent them from abusing psychoactive substances.

The transition from military to civilian life is a significant source of stress for service members because they are often psychologically unprepared for civilian life following demobilisation or discharge from the army. Their daily routine changes and they need to find employment, yet their comrades or commanders, who they could previously rely on, are no longer by their side.

V. Rubtsov identifies five stages in the social adaptation of military personnel: The preparatory stage, when a service member realises that their discharge from the army is inevitable. Work with the serviceperson must begin at this stage to ensure their adaptation is successful. The second stage is the period of psychological strain prior to demobilisation or discharge, when the service member realises that they are losing their sense of importance and usefulness to the army. At this stage, they may reassess their values. The third stage is the stage of acute psychological reactions to re-entering civilian life. At this stage, the service member faces many new “discoveries” as they begin to adapt to the rules, norms, and values of civilian life. The fourth stage is characterised by acute psychological reactions to leaving military life. At this stage, the service member may miss the strict daily routine, orders and commands. They may be plagued by the feeling that they have forgotten to do something important and experience nightmares about the horrors of war. The fifth stage involves re-evaluating old stereotypes and acquiring new ones. At this stage, service personnel can reconsider old skills and stereotypes that hinder them in civilian life, and acquire new skills to help them adapt and communicate better⁸. Various barriers may arise during the social adaptation of service personnel, and they may require support from society to overcome them. These barriers include professional barriers, such as the challenge of finding a job upon returning to civilian life; psychological barriers, such as servicemen’s psychological unpreparedness for civilian life, job-seeking, and working in a new role; and financial barriers, such as the financial difficulty many service personnel face when trying to find a

⁷ Яровий В. В. Професійна реінтеграція учасників бойових дій: український і міжнародний досвід. Особистість в екстремальних умовах. Матеріали VIII Всеукраїнської науково-практичної конференції, 2017, с. 140–143.

⁸ Рубцов В. Актуальні проблеми соціальної адаптації військовослужбовців та членів їх сімей. Київ: Міжнародний фонд соціальної адаптації, 2011.

job. Until they find a job, they may be supported by their family or the state, which can lead to the development of an inferiority complex or a sense of humiliation.

2. Levels and Degrees of Service Members' Social Adaptation

We distinguish between mental adaptation, which involves the assimilation of new ideas, norms and values at the level of consciousness, and behavioural adaptation, which involves the manifestation of these assimilated norms and values in actions and interactions. An “adaptive conflict” may arise between these levels of adaptive behaviour. For example, a person may accept their new social environment at the level of consciousness, but based on objective indicators such as unemployment, homelessness or a lack of social contacts, it is difficult to regard them as having adapted. Following H. Esser, we shall classify the following as mental/subjective indicators of adaptation: (1) subjective satisfaction with the new situation, (2) integration into the social environment, (3) identification with the new social environment, and (4) positive societal, state and media attitudes towards the service member.

Behavioural/objective indicators of social adaptation include: (1) having a job; (2) receiving an education (at a technical college, a higher education institution or in informal educational settings); (3) owning or renting accommodation; (4) having an income; (5) having friendly, romantic or marital relationships with others, and membership of various social groups. It should be borne in mind that a high level of social adaptation does not imply that the process is complete. An individual's level of adaptation may vary at different stages of their life (for example, whilst a young serviceman may exhibit a low level of social adaptation, this may become moderate or high as they reach a more mature age).

We distinguish three levels of social adaptation among military personnel: high, moderate and low.

- High: the majority of indicators of adaptation are present at both the mental and behavioural levels. These indicators are positive in nature.

- Moderate: some indicators of adaptation are absent at either the mental or behavioural levels. These indicators are of a moderate nature.

- Low: most indicators of adaptation are absent at both the mental and behavioural levels. These indicators are of a negative nature. The study used both objective and subjective indicators to measure the levels of social adaptation among military personnel.

Objective indicators of the social adaptation of military personnel include:

- Housing and living conditions: the availability of stable housing, whether owned or rented.

- Employment status: having a permanent job, actively seeking employment or being unable to work for health reasons.

- Income level: the financial situation of the military service member's family and their ability to meet basic and additional needs.

- Socio-relational status: having a family (whether married or in a civil partnership), having children and maintaining or rebuilding a social circle of friends.

- Educational and qualification level: having a basic education or wanting to obtain one, as well as professional retraining.

The subjective indicators of the social adaptation of military personnel include:

- Overall life satisfaction: the military service member's overall subjective evaluation of the quality and completeness of their current life.

- Satisfaction with professional activity: the subjective perception of current work or education, as well as the level of fulfilment experienced in the civilian sphere.
- Satisfaction with housing conditions and income: the personal assessment of the adequacy of current material support and living comfort.
- Subjective assessment of the life situation: the individual perception of current life circumstances and the level of optimism regarding one's own future.
- Sense of belonging to the civilian environment: the level of psychological connection, identification and emotional bonding with the local community.

Characteristics of *high social adaptation* among military personnel include subjective criteria such as a high level of satisfaction with life, income, housing and employment; harmonious family relationships and a positive perception of society's attitude towards veterans; and a consistently positive emotional state and strong sense of belonging in the civilian environment; and objective criteria include the presence of a family and stable family ties; an established social circle; permanent employment and a stable income sufficient for livelihood; adequate housing; and a professional education or active desire to obtain one.

Characteristics of *low social adaptation* among military personnel include subjective criteria such as acute dissatisfaction with life, financial standing, living conditions, professional activity and family relationships; disappointment due to negative or indifferent societal attitudes towards the military; and a pessimistic emotional state and weak psychological connection with the civilian environment; and objective criteria include prolonged difficulties with employment or complete unemployment; low income and material deprivation; lack of stable housing; absence of a family or deep crisis in relationships with a partner; low educational level or dissatisfaction with the acquired profession, which hinders professional development.

If all indicators of high or low levels of social adaptation are present in military personnel, one can speak of an "ideal" type of adaptation⁹. However, even if only two-thirds of the indicators for each type of adaptation are present, we can still speak of a certain level of social adaptation among military personnel. The "mixed" type of adaptation (where signs of both high and low levels of adaptation are exhibited) and the "moderate" type of adaptation (where subjective and objective indicators of adaptation are at the middle level) should be classified as representing a *moderate level of social adaptation* among military personnel.

As the social adaptation of military personnel is heavily influenced by the socio-psychological and institutional support they receive from their immediate networks and institutional bodies, it is important to determine which fields of Ukrainian society are most effective at resolving reintegration issues¹⁰. To empirically capture the primary sources of assistance, the survey uses a closed question asking military personnel who helped them solve problems in their personal lives after returning from military service. Respondents can select from the following options: family (spouses, parents, and children); friends and fellow service members; the state (government agencies, social services, and veteran funds); volunteers and

⁹ Артеменко А., Батаєва К. Мілітарна ідентичність та соціальна адаптація ветеранів АТО/ООС. Харків: Вид-во НУА, 2022. 192 с. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357092040_MILITARNA_IDENTICIST_TA_SOCIALNA_ADAPTACIA_VETERA_NIV_ATOOS

¹⁰ Artemenko A., Bataeva E. Influence of military identity on social adaptation of Ukrainian veterans. Ukr. Socium, 2021, 3(78), 54-75. <https://doi.org/10.15407/socium2021.03.054>

non-governmental organisations; individuals who rely solely on themselves; and other specified sources of support.

It would also be advisable to introduce a measure of self-assessment of service personnel's level of social adaptation, for example by asking them to rate the extent to which they have been able to adapt to civilian life. This is carried out on a five-point scale ranging from 1 – "Have not adapted at all" to 5 – "Have adapted completely". These indicators of social adaptation were used in the study to examine how various forms of military identity impact the social adaptation process of service personnel.

3. The main contexts of military personnel's social adaptation to civilian life

We identify three main contexts for the social adaptation of military personnel to civilian life: a) transition through higher or vocational education; b) transition through the labour market; c) transition through establishing/maintaining social contacts with 'significant others' (family members, friends). All these transitions take place within the respective contexts of military personnel's social adaptation to civilian life – educational, professional and everyday.

Let us examine the characteristics of military personnel's social adaptation to civilian life using N. Schlossberg's concept of transition. N. Schlossberg defines a transition as any event or non-event that leads to a change in the behaviour, relationships and roles of a social actor¹¹. N. Schlossberg identifies several types of transition: an expected transition, which occurs predictably (for example, finishing school or university); unforeseen or unplanned transition (for example, the sudden death of a loved one, which requires the individual to adapt over a long period); and 'nonevent' transition, that is, one that was expected but did not occur. N. Schlossberg identified four factors that influence a person's ability to adapt to the transition process – situation, self, support and strategies – otherwise known as the 4S model. When analysing a transition, it is necessary to answer several questions: what accelerated the transition; did it occur at the right or wrong time from the perspective of the individual's social prospects; is the process under the individual's control; have their social roles changed as a result; have they gained or lost; and how long does it last?

Transitions may be forced, resulting from the actions of other actors, or voluntary, in which case adaptation may proceed more smoothly. The duration of the transition (whether it is permanent, temporary or cyclical) also influences the extent to which the individual adapts to it. When analysing oneself in a transitional situation, it is necessary to consider personal and demographic characteristics (such as socio-economic status, gender, age, health and ethnicity) and psychological characteristics (such as personal development, worldview and life values). An analysis of the self requires an examination of the individual's psychosocial competence, encompassing:

- a) Attitudes towards oneself, including self-esteem, an internal locus of control and a sense of responsibility.
- b) Attitudes towards the world, including a moderate level of trust and optimism.
- c) Behavioural attitudes, including taking the initiative, setting realistic goals, persistence in achieving goals, planning activities, finding pleasure in success and finding information relevant to a specific life situation.

¹¹ Schlossberg N. A Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition. The Counseling Psychologist, 1981. 9:2.

When analysing the “support” factor, it is necessary to determine whether the individual receives support from political, religious or professional organisations, or from a partner or other close individuals, such as family members or friends. Support can therefore be either institutional or interpersonal.

Analysing an individual’s behaviour in a transitional situation involves identifying strategies aimed at regulating, controlling, and managing stress during the transition. S. Pearlin and L. Schooler identified three types of coping strategy: those aimed at changing or reframing the situation, and those aimed at reducing stress (e.g. meditation or physical exercise)¹². According to N. Schlossberg, a person who flexibly employs various coping strategies is better able to cope with a crisis. Different social actors vary in their degree of adaptability to transitional situations. For example, losing one’s job may encourage one person to develop new interests and actively seek another job, while another person may become inactive, experiencing a sense of hopelessness and confusion. Schlossberg emphasises that individuals should adapt to transitional situations. By “adaptation to transition”, she means the process by which an individual moves from a state of preoccupation with the transition to integrating the fact of the transition into their life. The ease of transition depends on factors such as the difference between an individual’s life circumstances before and after the transition, and the balance between their personal resources and deficits. If the differences between the two are minor, adaptation will be easier. Conversely, if these conditions differ significantly, the process of adapting may take longer and be more difficult.

M. Anderson, J. Goodman and N. Schlossberg identified three phases of transition: moving in, moving through, and moving out¹³. The first stage is ‘moving in’ to a new situation while simultaneously ‘moving out’ of a previous one. When transitioning to a new life context, a person must familiarise themselves with new roles, relationships, and rules. This process may be accompanied by an identity crisis as they attempt to assimilate information from the new environment with their previous experience. The second stage (moving through) begins when the new environment becomes familiar and the person has learnt to balance its demands. The third stage (moving out) occurs when the transition is complete, and the individual prepares for future transitions.

Let us consider the transition of military personnel from military service to civilian life, which may affect how they adapt socially to a new or familiar environment. We analyse the specific features of this transition through the education system, whether higher or vocational. Broadly speaking, education involves the systematic acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities, the development of the mind and emotions, and the formation of worldviews and intellectual interests. According to three-phase transition model, military personnel first leave military service (moving out), then assume the role of students, integrating their civilian and military identities and becoming involved in the new university environment (moving in and through). Finally, they leave with a renewed civilian worldview (moving out)¹⁴.

¹² Pearlin L. I., Schooler C. The structure of coping. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 1978. 19, 2–21.

¹³ Anderson M. L., Goodman J., & Schlossberg N. K. *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg’s theory with practice in a diverse world*. 4th Ed. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2012.

¹⁴ Wheeler H. A. Veterans’ Transitions to Community College: A Case Study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 2012. 36, 775–792.

N. Schlossberg's 4S concept enables us to identify the factors that play a significant role in the transition of military personnel through higher education. These factors are crucial for understanding how military personnel navigate this process. Analysing the transition situation involves examining how service members' roles and positions change after enrolling in a higher education institution. Identity analysis involves examining service members' personal (psychological and demographic) characteristics and value orientations, which may influence their integration into the university environment. An analysis of social support from the administration, faculty and students examines the conditions under which military personnel can adapt more easily to the educational system. The analysis of military personnel's behavioural strategies aims to examine the socio-psychological mechanisms they use to successfully complete the transition, including decision-making and stress management skills.

Let's examine the characteristics of the transition of military personnel through higher education that have been identified in Western and Ukrainian sociology and psychology. H. Weller suggested that the identity of military personnel may cause them to feel uncomfortable in a student group, make them miss their military units and prevent them from finding a substitute for this feeling at the educational institution. Consequently, military personnel tend to form bonds with each other at educational institutions, based on shared experiences and mutual trust. Military identity also influences their expectations of the behaviour of students and faculty at the educational institution. There is a risk of misunderstanding between military personnel and students who have not served in the military, given the enormous and often insurmountable differences between those who have recently graduated from high school and service members who have served for two or more years and participated in combat operations. H. Wheeler identified three sources of frustration for military students: the behaviour of civilian students in the classroom, often manifesting as a lack of respect for instructors and insufficient diligence in completing academic assignments; students' lack of knowledge about the war; and questions that students and faculty asked them which the servicemen considered inappropriate (for example, how many people they had killed; whether it is permissible to use violence against the civilian population)¹⁵.

Many Western researchers focus on analysing the destructive factors that hinder the successful academic adaptation of student veterans. The transition from military life to university is accompanied by deep socio-cultural dissonance. Upon entering a higher education institution, veterans find themselves in a decentralised environment with unfamiliar social characteristics. This environment lacks the clear hierarchy and command-based behavioural regulation that are typical of military subculture. An additional barrier is the significant communicative divide with civilian students and instructors, driven by the latter's lack of understanding of the specifics of military experience. Consequently, for many veterans, integrating into university life becomes the most critical and psychologically challenging phase of their life transition¹⁶. Researchers identify the transformation of the

¹⁵ Wheeler H. A. Veterans' Transitions to Community College: A Case Study. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 2012. 36, 775–792.

¹⁶ DiRamio D., Spires M. Partnering to assist disabled veterans in transition. *New directions for student services*, 2009. 126, 81–88.

combatant's personal identity as vital for overcoming these barriers¹⁷. Specifically, D. DiRamio and K. Jarvis emphasise the importance of demilitarising one's consciousness and establishing a stable civilian identity as a prerequisite for a successful academic career¹⁸. Given the traumatic and ambivalent nature of transitioning from military service to civilian student life, leading experts in veteran policy emphasise that this problem cannot be resolved through the individual efforts of the service member alone. Y. Hunter-Johnson and B. Jenner demonstrate the necessity of actively mobilising institutional resources within higher education¹⁹. This involves developing and implementing specialised university reintegration programmes that provide psychosocial support for veterans and cultivate the academic skills necessary for effective learning²⁰. L. Wang, D. Elder, and N. Spence document the objective consequences of this process, demonstrating that direct combat exposure decreases the probability of veterans attaining a full higher education. They note that, due to psychological and adaptation barriers, combatants are more likely to pursue short-term programmes or college diplomas than bachelor's or master's degrees at traditional universities²¹.

A vital area of research is the comparative analysis of military and academic cultures²². Many authors emphasise that the radical contrast in values and organisation between these two socio-cultural systems poses a latent hindrance to the academic careers of military personnel²³. Despite these destructive factors, an examination of motivational patterns reveals a high level of proactivity among student veterans²⁴. For example, Y. Hunter-Johnson's research identifies the key incentives that drive combatants to enrol in higher education institutions. The primary driving forces behind veteran education are defined as follows:

- the systemic upgrade of professional qualifications;
- the diversification and expansion of career growth opportunities after discharge to the reserve;
- the pursuit of personal self-improvement;
- a complete career track change;
- the conceptual attainment of an academic degree;

¹⁷ Zinger L., Cohen A. Veterans Returning from War into the Classroom: How can Colleges be Better Prepared to Meet Their Needs. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 2010. 3(1), 39–51.

¹⁸ DiRamio D., Jarvis K. Veterans in Higher Education: when Johnny and Jane Come Marching to Campus. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 2011. 37, 3, 1–144.

¹⁹ Hunter-Johnson Y. Promoting Veterans in Higher Education: Motivation and Adjustments to Their Learning Environments. *International Research Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 2018. 4(1), 66–79.

²⁰ Jenner B. M. Student Veterans and the Transition to Higher Education: Integrating Existing Literatures. *Journal of Veterans Studies*. 2017.

²¹ Wang L., Elder G. H. Jr., & Spence N. J.). Status Configurations, Military Service and Higher Education. *Social Forces*, 2012. 91(2), 397–422.

²² Cunningham J. Veteran's Post-Secondary Education: Keeping the Promise to Those Who Serve. *The Hinckley Journal of Politics*, 2012. vol.13, 14–20.

²³ Schiavone V., Gentry D. Veteran-students in Transition at a Midwestern University. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 2014. 62(1), 29–38.

²⁴ Perna L. W., Titus M. A. The Relationship Between Parental Involvement as Social Capital and College Enrollment: An Examination of Racial/Ethnic Group Differences. *Journal of Higher Education*, 2005. 76(5), 485–518.

– the desire to maximise future financial and economic status.

To provide a deeper explanation of the differences in academic outcomes, L. Perna and M. Titus apply the concept of social capital. The researchers evaluate the synergistic effect of a veteran's academic, cultural and social capital. Empirical research has proven that high levels of performance in primary school and strong mathematical skills are directly correlated with a greater desire to pursue higher education. Concurrently, the cultural and social capital of the service member's parents (e.g. higher education qualifications, advanced linguistic and cultural skills, and extensive social networks with influential individuals) acts as a powerful facilitator, ensuring the stability and success of the veteran's academic journey in civilian life.

The study by L. Sokurianska, K. Bataeva, and O. Golikov provides significant insights into the conceptualisation and adaptation of international experiences to Ukrainian realities²⁵. The authors conducted a thorough theoretical analysis of leading Western models for supporting combatants within educational institutions, identifying three key approaches. The first approach is based on the concept of a "veteran-friendly" higher education institution, presupposing the development of institutional sensitivity towards the specific challenges faced by combatants. This is achieved by developing and implementing programmes designed to optimise learning and enhance the academic skills of student veterans²⁶. The second approach involves creating autonomous veteran cohorts – isolated or semi-autonomous groups of student veterans designed to facilitate their initial entry into academia²⁷ and foster mutual psychosocial support²⁸. The third approach involves establishing veteran resource centres as specialised university locations for communication, shared recreation, efficiently resolving academic challenges and organising tutoring assistance²⁹. Drawing upon the results of their own qualitative study, Ukrainian sociologists developed an applied project for the social reintegration of veterans into university life, offering strategic recommendations to local higher education institutions. Support should be institutionalised by introducing specialised positions for academic consultants (tutors) and by establishing dedicated psychological support services for student combatants. Creating an inclusive environment requires intentional educational initiatives that target faculty and civilian students, fostering sensitivity towards the specifics of military experience. Academic facilitation requires the organisation of free preparatory courses to ease veterans' initial transition into education, as well as the design of flexible distance-learning pathways. To ensure deeper social integration and cultivate academic loyalty, the authors also propose creating specialised online platforms and actively involving student veterans in various shared academic and social university projects. Implementing such comprehensive programmes in Ukrainian universities is essential, as it allows veterans to convert their military experience into valuable civilian skills.

²⁵ Sokurianska L., Bataeva R., Golikov O. Social support for integration practices of Ukrainian veterans in higher education. *Ukr. Socium*, 2021, 2(77), 95-106 <https://doi.org/10.15407/socium2021.02.095>

²⁶ Francis L. C., Kraus A. Developing a Student Veteran Center: The Confluence of Academic and Military Cultures. *About Campus*, 2012, 17(4), 11–14.

²⁷ Persky K. R., Oliver D. E. Veterans coming home to the community college: Linking research to practice. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 2010, 35(1–2), 111–120.

²⁸ Beachboard M. R., Beachboard J. C., Li W., Adkison S. R. Cohorts and Relatedness: Self-determination Theory as an Explanation of How Learning Communities Affect Educational Outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, 2011, 52, p.853–874.

²⁹ Francis L. C., Kraus A. Developing a Student Veteran Center: The Confluence of Academic and Military Cultures. *About Campus*, 2012, 17(4), 11–14.

L. Sokurianska, K. Bataeva, and V. Bakirov examined the attitudes of student veterans towards higher education reform in detail, thoroughly investigating the socio-cultural and value-based aspects of their academic activity³⁰. They also established direct links between military experience and the educational practices of combatants. Based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with five military service members studying at Kharkiv higher education institutions, the authors explored how military culture impacts veterans' perceptions of the university environment and their attitudes towards online learning. They also examined the overall axiological meaning of veterans' educational practices. Using these empirical data, L. Sokurianska et al. proposed recommendations to optimise the academic position of this student group. Firstly, as many students with military experience value collective learning formats that facilitate the discussion of specific tasks, it is necessary to incorporate game-based and project-based work methods into the educational process. Secondly, as student combatants possess contradictory metacognitive skills (combining high behavioural discipline and punctuality with a preference for external control and monitoring of their activities by high-status social actors), they may not learn effectively in a purely online format. Consequently, the authors demonstrate the viability of organising education for student veterans in a blended format that harmoniously combines the traditional context of face-to-face classroom work with an electronic context oriented towards absorbing information online.

Let's examine the post-military transition of service members through the lens of employment. As sociological studies show, service members who are able to develop a sense of self after military service are more likely to find good jobs, earn higher incomes, have better life skills and enjoy healthy family and professional relationships. Conversely, those who have been unable to integrate their former and new identities are more likely to face various life challenges³¹.

Western sociologists have studied various forms of change in military experience. For instance, "soft" forms of personal transformation can ensure continuity between military and civilian professional contexts. Examples include joining the police, prison systems or security organisations, where a masculine professional culture predominates³². Another "soft" forms of transition involve retraining, pursuing higher education, and taking specialised courses at companies to facilitate professional adaptation. Some Western countries have developed national programmes to support military personnel in their transitions. For instance, the "Corporate Pact" (part of the "Armed Forces Pact" project) in the United Kingdom has been signed by over 900 British companies, who have committed to supporting the professional transition of former service members.

T. Martsenyuk et al. found that demobilised women and men face a lack of employment opportunities in civilian life. Among the employment-related problems they mention are the lack of suitable jobs, low wages, unprofessional employment service staff, lack of start-up funds and knowledge, and so on³³. Conversely, it was found that women who had worked in

³⁰ Sokurianska L., Bataeva K., Bakirov V. Ukrainian veterans in higher education: military identity and educational practices. *The Ideology and Politics Journal*. 2 (13), 2019, 167-184.

³¹ Praharsó N. F., Tear M. J., Cruwys T. Stressful life transitions and wellbeing: A comparison of the stress buffering hypothesis and the social identity model of identity change. *Psychiatry Res.*, 2017. 247, p. 265–275.

³² Higate P. 'Soft Clerks' and 'hard civvies': Pluralizing military masculinities. *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State*, Praeger, 2003, 27–42.

³³ Марценюк Т., Квіт А., Гриценко Г., Василенко Л., Звягінцева М. «Невидимий батальйон 2.0»: повернення ветераном до мирного життя, 2019.

the civil service prior to mobilisation, as well as those who owned their own businesses, did not encounter employment issues upon returning home – their positions in the labour market was more secure.

O. Mramornova and O. Kharchenko examined issues related to the employment or unemployment of demobilised servicemen, and the impact of their military experience on labour relations. The authors argue that successful employment, job satisfaction, financial stability and public recognition of the importance of their work are key to the social integration of military personnel. The study's findings (N=904) revealed that 45.6% of respondents lived in their own homes, while 54.4% lived in rented housing, government-provided housing, or with relatives. 20.4% of servicemen reported that they were living on the poverty line. 38.8% stated that they had enough money for housing, food, and clothing. One-third respondents have enough money for everything they need, while only 6.2% of respondents were able to save money and live in comfort. 4.2% are unemployed and have no source of income, and a small percentage of respondents are students (0.8%). Of those who are unemployed, 1.7% are unable to work due to disability, and 1.4% are retired. The main reasons for not working were a lack of available jobs where they live (36.3%) and health problems preventing them from working (28.1%)³⁴.

Service members demonstrate a high capacity for adapting to the workplace by successfully converting the “soft” military skills they acquired during their service into valuable assets for their post-military careers. These key soft skills include: reliability; coping with uncertainty; planning and thinking strategically; communicating and interacting with others in person or online; written and oral communication; creativity and self-confidence; self-management and time management; and a willingness to learn and take on responsibility. D. Chikas et al. found that around 85% of employers believe service members to be “disciplined, good team players and reliable”, while 80% state that they “take on a high level of responsibility and possess team-building skills”³⁵.

Let's consider the third form of transition from military to civilian life for service members: the creation and maintenance of social contacts with “significant others” (family members and friends). Family can play a decisive role in the social adaptation process of military personnel after they return from the army. This is because service members trust their family members, and under their influence they may begin to change their behaviour and worldview in order to adapt more effectively to civilian life³⁶. Family members can provide psychological support by accepting service members as individuals and being willing to listen to and support them. Social and family support, as well as recognition from the public and the media, can be classified as “soft” methods of influencing the social adaptation process of military personnel. These methods stimulate social interactions and influence the

³⁴ Kharchenko O., Mramornova O. Problems of veterans of anti-terrorist operation in the east of Ukraine. Visnyk of V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University. Series Sociological Studies of Contemporary Society: Methodology, Theory, Methods, 2017, 37, 115-124.

³⁵ Chikas J., Maiden P., Oh H., Wilcox S., & Young D. From war to the workplace: Helping veterans transition to civilian work settings. Center for Innovation and Research (CIR) on Veterans and Military Families, 2012

³⁶ Батаєва К. В., Артеменко А. Б. Дружини українських військовослужбовців-комбатантів: копінг-стратегії та ресурс соціального капіталу. Український соціум. 2023. № 1. С. 112-135. URL: <http://jnas.nbuv.gov.ua/article/UJRN-0001404380>

development of a sense of belonging to a group³⁷. D. Blackburn categorised the issues that veterans encountered upon leaving the military under the following headings: social life, personal life, mental health, family life, finances, health, education, and career. Veterans reported problems in at least one of the following four areas: mental health, social life, family life and finances. Service members identified factors that facilitate adaptation, primarily family support (from spouses and/or parents), followed by support from other service members and services provided by psychologists, doctors and social workers³⁸.

It is important to recognise the significant role of social support for service members in the process of social adaptation. It is important to foster tolerance towards service members within society. As K. Amiot emphasises, service members' awareness of their recognition and social significance can contribute to the formation of a positive post-military identity. Therefore, when studying the military identity of service members, it is necessary to determine how they perceive their public image, how they are portrayed in the media, and how public discourse can facilitate or hinder their social adaptation.

The transition from military service to civilian life represents a complex process that simultaneously unfolds across social-domestic, professional, and intrapersonal contexts. This trajectory introduces profound psychological challenges, affecting not only the former service members but also their immediate family units. A primary source of tension during this period is the sharp contrast between deeply ingrained military habits and the shifting demands of civilian culture. Service members often possess highly developed traits such as rigid discipline, exceptional integrity, and a strong preference for hierarchical order. While these qualities are essential for military cohesion, they can inadvertently create friction in civilian environments, where success often requires traits that may have been suppressed during service, such as individual autonomy, spontaneous decision-making, and unstructured creativity. Consequently, veterans experience a distinct tension between their internal values and changing objective social status, which complicates overall environmental mastery.

In addition, informing service members about the identity crisis they may face after demobilisation, as well as how to effectively resolve it, can play an important role in facilitating a smoother process of social adaptation. Service members need to realise that successfully completing this transition may require them to significantly modify their military identity in order to adjust to civilian life. They often undergo a form of "reverse culture shock," where a mission-driven, highly structured lifestyle is abruptly replaced by the fluid and sometimes fragmented reality of civilian society. Without proactive, formalized orientation programs that address these psychological shifts, this sudden loss of a clear social role can lead to alienation and severe social maladaptation.

Ultimately, while personal efforts toward identity modification are important, individual resilience alone is insufficient. A comprehensive system of support –bridging the state, military institutions, higher education, local communities, and businesses – is strictly necessary to ease this transition. State and military institutions must establish structured pre-discharge pathways that reframe demobilisation as a strategic phase of professional re-profiling. Concurrently, universities must develop "veteran-friendly" spaces with specialized academic support, while the corporate sector must create dedicated hiring tracks that

³⁷ Amiot C., de la Sablonniere R., Terry, D., Smith J. Integration of social identities in the self: toward a cognitive-developmental model. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2007, 11(4), 364–388.

³⁸ Blackburn D. Out of uniform: psychosocial issues experienced and coping mechanisms used by Veterans during the military–civilian transition. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health* ahead of print article, 2017, 3(1).

recognize the value of translated military skills. When these multi-level institutional efforts align with grassroots family and community support, the veteran is empowered to transform potential adaptation barriers into a successful and sustainable civilian trajectory, leading to a high level of overall social integration.

CONCLUSIONS

The main findings of our study are as follows:

First, social adaptation is a multilevel and inherently open-ended process spanning a mental (cognitive-value) dimension and a behavioural dimension. Drawing on H. Esser's four-component model of integration (acculturation, placement, interaction, identification), successful adaptation requires the alignment of an individual's subjective well-being with objective indicators of social standing. A mismatch between these levels produces what can be termed an "adaptive conflict": a positive orientation toward the new environment that is not matched by tangible achievements such as employment, housing, or stable social ties.

Second, the study supports distinguishing three levels of adaptedness (high, moderate, and low) and a sequence of stages – a preparatory stage, a stage of psychological tension preceding demobilization, acute reactions to entering civilian life and to leaving military life, and a final stage of revising prior behavioural stereotypes. This process is estimated to last three to four years, and withdrawing social-psychological support at any stage, particularly the final one, substantially raises the risk of incomplete adaptation.

Third, the principal barriers to reintegration are professional, psychological, and material, compounded by a lack of civilian work experience, a competitive labour market, and psychological unreadiness for peacetime life. N. Schlossberg's transition theory (the 4S model – situation, self, support, and strategies) offers a systematic framework for analysing three key channels of post-military transition: education, employment, and everyday social contact, each following its own dynamic of moving in, through, and out.

Fourth, research on the transition through higher education shows that friction between military and academic culture is a substantial obstacle for veteran students, and that veterans remain a very small share of the Ukrainian student population. This points to a need for "veteran-friendly" university programs – dedicated academic advisors, psychological support services, preparatory courses, and blended learning formats.

Fifth, in the employment domain, converting "soft" military skills – discipline, leadership, stress tolerance, teamwork – into civilian professional capital proves decisive, while family support is consistently identified across the empirical studies reviewed as the single strongest adaptation resource.

Finally, a key challenge lies in bridging the civilian-military divide, which often manifests as subtle stigmatization or social distancing toward veterans. The effective reintegration of combatants cannot be achieved through a purely bureaucratic lens; rather, it requires the development of a multilevel support system that seamlessly integrates the resources of families, educational institutions, the labour market, and the media.

Future research should focus on investigating the mechanics of "adaptive conflict", wherein an individual's high psychological motivation is counteracted by a deficit in tangible civilian achievements, thereby necessitating robust diagnostic instruments to align subjective well-being with objective social standing. To address this challenge effectively, empirical attention must be directed toward distinct veteran sub-cohorts – such as female combatants, young volunteers lacking pre-war civilian careers, and personnel with service-related disabilities – whose unique reintegration trajectories remain significantly under-researched. Within this differentiated framework, higher education emerges as a critical channel for

transition, requiring future studies to systematically evaluate the institutional efficacy of “veteran-friendly” university standards.

SUMMARY

This study addresses the critical issue of the structural, psychological and social barriers that hinder the post-military transition of Ukrainian military personnel. The research analyses veteran reintegration in the areas of higher education, employment, and everyday social interaction. The findings suggest that social adaptation is a multi-level process in which a discrepancy between subjective well-being and objective status results in an ‘adaptive conflict’. In the educational sphere, cultural friction poses a significant challenge for veteran students. To address this issue, the study emphasises the urgent need for ‘veteran-friendly’ university programmes, including specialised academic advisors and blended learning formats. In the employment sector, converting ‘soft’ military skills into professional capital in the civilian sector is crucial for successful integration. Finally, the results show that family support is the most important resource for helping service members adapt.

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