International Partners Guide for Ukrainian Civil Society in the Security and Defence Sector Support

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Why and for Whom This Guide Is Intended

This concise guide is addressed to international partners seeking to strengthen Ukraine's defence capacity and to contribute to its victory in the existential and genocidal war launched by the Russian Federation. Its core argument is that support for civil society in the security and defence sector has been, and in many cases remains, an insufficiently recognised component of the overall international assistance.

At the same time, relatively modest investments in civil society within the defence sector — particularly when compared to the scale of bilateral military assistance — can generate a significant multiplier effect for defence reforms, battlefield effectiveness, and the development of the defence-industrial base. Realising this potential requires a deeper understanding of the national context and the civic participation role across all areas of public governance, including defence.

For this reason, the guide provides a concise overview of the role of civil society in Ukraine's defence sector, identifies key gaps in international cooperation with civil society actors, and offers recommendations on how these gaps may be addressed.

This guide is based on a synthesis of the Ukrainian civil society organisations experience operating in the defence sector, expert assessments, and consultations with key stakeholders. The methodology included focus group discussions with security and defence civil society organisations experienced in cooperation with international partners; a review and synthesis of existing analytical and research materials; expert assessments and consultations; as well as in-depth interviews with civil society representatives, sectoral experts, and other relevant stakeholders.

The following organisations participated in the focus group discussions: the Independent Defence Anti-Corruption Committee (NAKO), the Centre for Defence Strategies (CDS), the Serhiy Prytula Charity Foundation, the "Come Back Alive" Charity Foundation, the Better Regulation Delivery Office (BRDO), the Aerorozvidka NGO, StateWatch, the Sahaidachnyi Security Center, the Snake Island Institute, and the Price of Freedom NGO

The Role of Civil Society in the Defence Sector

Since 2014, when Russia illegally annexed Crimea and began occupying parts of the Donbas, and especially since the launch of the full-scale invasion in 2022, the role of Ukrainian civil society has changed fundamentally. It has become an integral actor within the security and defence sector, assuming functions that the state, under wartime conditions, is not always able to fulfil. This shift has reshaped cooperation between civil society organisations, state institutions, business, society, and international partners.

Ukraine's experience shows the emergence of a new social institution: the civic defence sector. Its work goes far beyond traditional volunteering. It includes logistics, innovation, analysis, policy development, advocacy, cooperation with government, and military personnel training.

These actors have already proven their ability to:

❖ develop evidence- and data-driven policies;

❖ conduct world-class war scenarios, resilience, and the future battlefield analysis;

❖ create platforms for horizontal cooperation between the state, the military, veterans, experts, and partners;

❖ design and pilot new educational and leadership programmes in the field of security.

Ukrainian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) hold a unique position. They work simultaneously with the military, the state, and society. Their solutions rely on field data, meet transparency standards, and follow best practices in project management. NGOs also provide an additional entry point for international partners. They enable knowledge exchange and joint defence capabilities strengthening. This complements government-to-government cooperation and supports direct collaboration between civil society organisations across countries.

For these reasons, supporting the defence sector through NGOs is strategically essential during a total war. This approach has created a distinctive model of civil society engagement in security and defence.

At the same time, many international partners and donors still lack a clear institutional understanding of the NGOs role in this sector. With

few exceptions, Western assistance focuses almost exclusively on state institutions. It often overlooks the non-governmental infrastructure without which long-term, sustainable reform is not possible.

The existing — and comparatively limited — support for civic defence initiatives continues to rely on procedures and approaches designed for peacetime. War demands faster, more flexible, and more adaptive forms of cooperation. Closing this gap is essential to improving the effectiveness of international assistance in the defence sector.

This creates a dual challenge for Ukrainian civil society. It must deliver critical defence functions while also convincing international partners of the legitimacy and effectiveness of its work.

There is strong demand to scale civic defence practices and to strengthen the civil society ecosystem within the defence sector. International partners — both governmental and non-governmental — can play a decisive role in this process.

Challenges Facing NGOs in the Security and Defence Sector and Gaps in International Cooperation

1. Limited and fragmented funding for the security and defence sector

The security and defence sector remains one of the most challenging areas for donor support. Donors tend to prioritise humanitarian, anti-corruption, recovery, and social programmes. As a result, many avoid funding defence reforms and related analytical or advocacy initiatives, often viewing them as politically sensitive or risky. At the same time, non-governmental actors are uniquely positioned to drive long-term strategic change. They complement state institutions, offer alternative perspectives, and help mitigate institutional "tunnel vision". Additional constraints stem from the legal and domestic international partners political frameworks, particularly governmental donors. However, lawful and well-tested mechanisms for funding defence-related activities already exist. Expanding these tools requires broader best practices dissemination from countries that have already adopted them (see the section "Successful International Practices").

2. Limited recognition of civil society's role and insufficient systemic communication

International partners do not always fully appreciate the role and added value of civil society in Ukraine's security and defence sector. As a result, NGOs are often required to repeatedly demonstrate their work

legitimacy and importance especially when engaging with new donors and partners. Developing a shared defence understanding as Ukraine's central national priority takes time and sustained effort. Arguments are not always absorbed quickly or in full. This underscores the need for consistent, high-quality communication that gradually builds trust, support, and a common vision.

At the same time, there is a growing need for deeper research into the role of civil society in Ukraine's defence sector, alongside more deliberate dissemination of these insights among international partners.

3. Insufficient and limited NGO engagement in the defence sector

Despite their substantial impact on defence, relatively few organisations work in this field on a systematic basis compared to other sectors. Several critically important areas — including mobilisation, human resource management, and the transformation of military institutions — remain politically sensitive and insufficiently addressed. This creates a clear need both to expand the civic defence sector itself and to support the development of defence-related programmes within NGOs that have traditionally operated in adjacent fields.

4. Ukrainian NGOs dependence on a limited group of partner countries and distorted priorities creates systemic risks. These include vulnerability to political shifts in those countries and limited opportunities to diversify funding. In some cases, international partners' agendas do not fully align with Ukraine's most pressing wartime needs. Foreign partners do not always have a deep understanding of the war context and dynamics. This can result in a gap between the real needs of the defence sector and the resources available to address them. These challenges highlight the need to engage a broader range of partner countries — both in supporting reforms within the Ministry of Defence and in funding a capable civil society that can accompany and scale these reforms. Such an approach also requires greater operational flexibility from donors and a deeper localisation of their activities in line with the Ukrainian context.

5. Bureaucratic constraints and a deficit of trust

Most donor procedures remain designed for peacetime contexts and offer limited flexibility in wartime conditions. Excessive bureaucracy slows the financial resources conversion into timely and relevant support for the defence sector and Ukraine's Defence Forces. A persistent lack of trust, often linked to perceptions of corruption risk, further complicates cooperation. Attempts by donors to mitigate these risks through parallel external control mechanisms can be counterproductive. They frequently overlook local expertise, existing transparency practices, and the institutional Ukrainian organisations capacity.

6. Constraints on international advocacy and its organisation

International advocacy is a critical instrument. Without it, Ukraine would have struggled to sustain international support in 2022 and beyond. In the defence sector, systematic engagement with partners and clear policy choices explanations are particularly important. At the same time, donors often avoid funding advocacy initiatives, viewing them as interference in domestic politics. Organising international advocacy visits that involve military personnel presents an additional challenge. Such efforts require significant administrative capacity, security procedures, and advance planning. This underscores the need for greater donor flexibility and for financial and procedural frameworks that reflect the war realities.

7. Operational uncertainty and the systemic cooperation mechanisms absence

Defence programmes are typically managed at the ministerial level. However, many international partners lack institutional capacity to manage grant programmes implemented by NGOs. This creates operational uncertainty, where cooperation largely takes place in a "ministry-to-ministry" format, while civil society remains confined to an implementing role without meaningful involvement in strategic decision-making. The absence of established and transparent partnership mechanisms with international donors limits programme scale, slows decision-making, and reduces the ability to respond effectively to urgent defence needs.

Taken together, these challenges risk leaving the still-fragile ecosystem of civic defence organisations without adequate support. The risks are not only financial, but primarily institutional. The loss of expert teams leads to the erosion of institutional memory, which is often preserved by civil society and analytical organisations amid frequent political change.

In the long term, this may slow reforms, increase transaction costs for the state, and raise the overall defence cost. The most vulnerable areas are also those of greatest relevance to international partners: defence reform, procurement transparency, innovation and R&D, human capital development, veterans' policy, strategic communications, and the documentation of the war.

Successful International Practices

1. Supporting defence reform as part of Official Development Assistance (ODA)

The United Kingdom's **Special Defence Advisor (SDA)** programme provides a strong example of systematic, long-term support for Ukraine's defence reforms within the framework of Official Development Assistance (ODA). This is a distinctive cooperation model that combines institutional support for the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence with targeted investment in the civil society sector. It funds both key ministerial reforms and education programmes, civil society organisations, and high-quality defence analysis.

The programme demonstrates an effective approach to building sustainable institutional mechanisms to support the security and defence sector. These mechanisms are scalable, both at NATO level and within the national systems of other partner countries. Most UK assistance to Ukraine's defence sector is structured around three interconnected pillars, all of which fully meet the OECD criteria for ODA.

The first pillar focuses on **good governance.** It supports democratic civilian Armed Forces oversight and the personnel management alignment and audit systems with NATO standards.

The second pillar addresses **anti-corruption**, with a strong emphasis on transparency and accountability, particularly in defence procurement and resource allocation.

The third pillar covers **human and reputational security**, including Women, Peace and Security (WPS), children and civilian protection in armed conflict, and the implementation of international humanitarian law.

In 2024 – 2025, alongside many other activities, the SDA programme implemented a number of educational initiatives aimed at developing a new generation of security and defence professionals. At the same time, significant resources were invested in strengthening the broader ecosystem — including funding for civil society organisations, networking, and the analytical capacity development. This included in-depth research on mobilisation practices in Ukraine, as well as leadership programmes for civilian professionals working in the defence sector.

Support for reforms covered a wide range of areas, from the defence procurement systems transformation to digitalisation projects and the management processes modernisation. This case demonstrates that supporting defence reform through ODA is not only possible, but effective, when institutional logic, local expertise, and long-term partnership are combined.

2. Supporting organisations from adjacent fields as a way to expand the defence ecosystem

Within Ukraine's civil society ecosystem, the number of organisations working systematically on security and defence remains disproportionately small compared to other sectors. For a country facing a full-scale war, this gap is particularly critical.

At the same time, Ukraine has a strong and mature civil society in adjacent fields — including anti-corruption, economics, governance, and digital transformation. These organisations have demonstrated the capacity to adapt to new challenges, reorient their work, or develop new defence- and security-related programmes.

Encouraging established and capable organisations from other sectors to develop defence-focused work has proven to be one of the most successful and scalable approaches. For international partners and donors, this pathway is also more accessible. Entry into the defence sector occurs gradually, through support for organisations with established track records in transparency, accountability, economic analysis, or digital reform, which then integrate defence issues into their portfolios.

a) The anti-corruption and defence intersection: the NAKO case

The Independent Anti-Corruption Commission (NAKO) became the first Ukrainian civil society organisation to take on a systematic role in defence sector public oversight. NAKO began its work in 2016 – 2019 as part of Transparency International's programme on countering corruption in the security and defence sector. From 2017, with the governments of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Sweden support, it received funding for independent operations.

This opened space for reform in a sector that had long been closed, opaque, and politically sensitive.

The NAKO case shows how anti-corruption expertise can be effectively integrated into the defence domain and become a driver of systemic change. What began with a narrow focus on democratic civilian oversight evolved into a comprehensive agenda. This now includes monitoring defence procurement, supporting defence industry reform, and analysing foreign components in Russian weapons systems and their supply chains. These findings are actively used by Ukraine's international partners in shaping sanctions policy.

b) The digitalisation and defence intersection: the BRDO case

Another illustrative example is the Better Regulation Delivery Office (BRDO). For more than a decade, BRDO has worked in regulatory policy, economic analysis, and digital transformation, supporting nearly all key Ukrainian ministries and public institutions.

Following the full-scale invasion, BRDO applied its expertise to the security and defence sector. In 2024, it formally integrated defence as a core area of work. Its strong reputation in other policy domains made it possible to attract international funding for projects at the digitalisation and defence intersection.

With the support of international donors — including the German government — and on the Ukrainian NGOs initiative, several digital products and IT solutions for the defence sector were developed and implemented by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence with BRDO's support. These solutions have been integrated into the Ministry's daily operations, demonstrating both their practical value and institutional recognition.

They include **Army+**, a service for the internal processes digitalisation within the Armed Forces; **Reserve+**, a system for managing reserve personnel and human resources; and legislation on cloud services, which laid the foundation for integrating modern digital technologies into the security and defence sector.

These cases show that engaging organisations from adjacent fields not only expands the defence ecosystem, but also accelerates innovation, lowers institutional barriers, and helps build sustainable mechanisms for transforming the defence sector.

Recommendations

I. Shift to long-term investment in civil society within the security and defence sector

International partners should move away from one-off grants. They should prioritise strategic, multi-year funding for civil society in the defence sector. They can build on successful models such as the UK's Special Defence Advisor Programme.

The main priority should be Ukraine's defence ecosystem development. It should not focus only on reconstruction or humanitarian projects. Investment in defence today directly reduces future humanitarian needs and reconstruction costs.

Within this approach, international donors can focus on the following areas:

1. Institutional development
Support new and growing institutions to close critical gaps. Encourage civil society organisations from other fields to transition into the security and defence sector.

2. Capacity building
Invest in leadership training. Strengthen analytical capacity and sector-specific expertise within selected organisations.

3. Coalition and ecosystem building
Support platforms and mechanisms that link institutions into a functional ecosystem. This includes coalitions, coordination hubs and joint programmes. Expand the pool of organisations and experts entering the security and defence sector.

4. Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing
Fund joint monitoring and evaluation processes. Support cross-institutional learning to strengthen overall system maturity.

5. Seed funding for under-supported areas
Identify thematic gaps, including logistics, doctrine development and military education. Support pilot projects in these areas.

6. International advocacy
Fund systematic international advocacy by Ukrainian NGOs. Strengthen their presence in policy and expert communities to promote security and defence decisions that are strategically important for Ukraine.

7. Knowledge base and experience exchange
Invest in the shared knowledge base creation and maintenance. This includes public databases and platforms for exchanging experience within Ukraine's defence ecosystem and with international partners.

II. Reduce bureaucratic barriers and introduce flexible funding mechanisms

International partners should cut excessive bureaucracy in funding for defence-related civil society. They should introduce fast, transparent and war-adapted funding mechanisms. This will allow quicker responses to sector needs, improve resource efficiency and reduce transaction costs for Ukrainian organisations.

III. Invest in communication and visibility of defence reforms through civil society

Donors should prioritise communication and public visibility of security and defence reforms, with active civil society involvement. This includes media campaigns, conferences, educational formats and analytical products. These efforts should target both Ukrainian audiences and international partners.

Ukrainian society needs a clearer defence reforms understanding that directly affect its security. International partners need to see the impact and unique role of Ukrainian NGOs. This requires concrete cases, success stories, analytical outputs and strong engagement on international platforms.

In place of conclusions

Ukraine is shaping a new model of interaction between the state, society and defence institutions. This model, tested by war, could serve as a reference for democracies worldwide. Civil society plays a central role.

To move from volunteer-driven mobilisation to a stable, institutional ecosystem, Ukraine needs substantial, consistent, long-term investment. Support from international partners — financial, institutional and expert — is critical. It will sustain and strengthen this unique ecosystem, which already contributes to collective security and the democratic systems resilience.