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Sergey Sukhankin  
Alla Hurska

## The Ukrainian Navy in the Black and Azov Seas after 2014: losses, achievements, prospects

## About the Author



Dr. Sergey Sukhankin is a Senior Fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, and an Advisor at Gulf State Analytics (Washington, D.C.) and a post-Doctoral Fellow with North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (Trent University, Canada). He received his PhD from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. His areas of interest include Kaliningrad and the Baltic Sea region, Russian information and cyber security, A2/AD and its interpretation in Russia, the Arctic region, and the development of Russian private military companies since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. He is now increasingly focusing on geo-economic issues (the Northern Sea Route and oil/LNG projects) in the Arctic region. He has consulted or briefed with CSIS (Canada), DIA (USA), and the European Parliament. His project discussing the activities of Russian PMCs, “War by Other Means” (with Jamestown Foundation) informed the United Nations General Assembly report entitled “Use of Mercenaries as a Means of Violating Human Rights and Impeding the Exercise of the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination.” He is currently teaching in MacEwan School of Business in Edmonton (Canada).



Alla Hurska is an Associate Fellow with the International Centre for Policy Studies (Kyiv), and an Analyst in the Jamestown Foundation (Washington, US) and she is pursuing her Masters degree in History at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Currently she is working on her MA thesis titled “Russian Ice-breaker diplomacy in the Arctic region: past, present and future”. Her areas of interest include Russian and Chinese policies in the Arctic region, nonlinear forms of warfare, disinformation, Ukrainian foreign and security policy, and the geopolitics of oil. Prior to starting her MA at the University of Alberta, Alla studied in Ukraine, Poland, Germany and Spain. She completed her previous MA in International Relations with a thesis on Russian-Ukrainian relations. Alla has received the University of Alberta Graduate Fellowship and Alberta Graduate Excellence Scholarship. She is a team member of the Defence and Security Foresight Group, University of Waterloo and a Graduate Fellow at the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network. Currently Alla is working as a Research Assistant for Prof. David Marples. She is a co-author of the book entitled “Joseph Stalin: A Reference Guide to His Life and Works.” Alla’s articles and expert comments have been published in international think tanks, research institutions, and news outlets, including the Jamestown Foundation (Washington, DC), Center for European Policy Analysis (Washington, DC), Diplomaatia (Estonia), ICPS (Ukraine), Kyiv Post (Ukraine) and, in Spain, CIDOB, Autonomous University of Barcelona, El Periódico de Catalunya, and El Confidencial. She also co-authored a peer-reviewed article entitled “Russia’s Private Military Contractors: Cause for Worry?” published in Canadian Military Journal.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This policy brief analyses the current military-political environment in the Black and Azov Seas, concentrating on Ukrainian capabilities in the light of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This piece discusses trends and future scenarios for Ukraine, outlining, among others, potential implications for NATO, in general, and Canada, in particular. The background segment provides the contextual framework, aiming to realistically assess the losses suffered by Ukraine as well as its achievements in restoring its military potential. Thereafter we highlight scenarios and implications for NATO/Canada's regional security interests. Given Russia's military power, the general complexity of military-political nature of the region, and growing frictions within NATO as well as Canada's geographic remoteness from the area, we argue that Canada's role in supporting Ukraine should be primarily concerned with:

- Rendering political-diplomatic and informational support;
- Financial assistance and knowledge transfer through cooperation in the realm of defence industry;
- Providing (non)lethal weaponry; and
- Continued participation in joint/multi-lateral military exercise and war games in the framework of NATO.

## **BACKGROUND**

The loss of Crimea in 2014 crippled Ukraine's naval military capabilities. Already inferior to the Russian naval forces before, the Ukrainian Naval Forces (VMSU) lost between 70 to 80 percent of their potential (Hurska, 2020). These losses can be considered along three dimensions (Vetrov, 2017). The first refers to the technical-material losses that resulted from Russia's expropriation of most up-to-date vessels including corvettes "Ternopil" and "Lutsk" as well as missile boats "Pridnestrovie" and "Priluki". The second relates to the personnel losses that occurred due to the massive defection. Out of 20,315 (para)military personnel, only 6,010 men returned to Ukraine – not military engagements. And the third pertains to the economic losses incurred when Russia established de facto control over thirty Crimea-based defense industry plants, some of which produce "unique products", including amphibious assault ships.

Despite these losses, Ukraine has managed to achieve some progress. Practically, it has revived its military and undertaken joint exercises with NATO. Doctrinally, of particular importance is the Strategy of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine 2035 (NS-2035), adopted in 2019 (Ukrainian Navy, 2019). This document outlined several specific objectives: the necessity to fortify the coastal defense; increased efficiency of the marines; the development of a "mosquito fleet"<sup>1</sup>; participation in international naval drills. These activities serve the broader goal of increasing defensive military potential of the VMSU.

Undoubtedly positive, three factors constrain the overall effectiveness of these efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept "mosquito fleet" refers to three main types of small boats – boats to patrol, to protect, and to convoy ships; fast amphibious-shock boats; missile boats – that theoretically could decrease offensive capabilities of the Russian naval forces. The value of "mosquito fleet" is premised on the fact that the use of this tool endows Kyiv with denial capabilities at sea at relatively low cost.

One constraint stems from Russia's efforts to beef up its regional military potential. Aside from quantitative and qualitative increases of its naval forces (Petersen, 2019), Russia has embarked on a massive militarization of Crimea, especially in its western part. It has been transferring to the peninsula most up-to-date means of electronic warfare, including Krasukha-4, Pishal, Rtut-BM, Vitebsk systems, and anti-missile/aircraft defense complexes such as the Pantsir S1, the S-400, the Bal and the Bastion (Sukhankin (a), 2021). According to Russian sources, by 2020, Crimea—along with Kaliningrad oblast and the Kola and Kamchatka peninsulas—was equipped with all necessary means of electronic warfare to transform the region into what could be roughly translated as an “area denial zone” (*zona ograničennogo dostupa*) (Boltenkov, 2020). In the event that Moscow deploys such pieces as the S-350 Vityaz and the S-500 Prometheus surface-to-air missile and anti-ballistic-missile systems as well as a Yakhroma early-warning missile-defense radar (to replace the older Voronezh meter-wavelength radars) (Zubarev, 2021), Crimea will become a full-fledged Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) zone.

A second constraint is rooted in Ukraine's own challenges. The fragility of Ukraine's military capabilities is profoundly aggravated by the country's challenging economic conditions and internal malaises. These problems include corruption, poverty, and covert activities of pro-Russian forces. At the same time, the excessive prioritization of a land-based military buildup has dominated Ukraine's strategic thinking for years. Now, it seems that this way of thinking is giving way to a more flexible approach, leading towards a visible imbalance in military capabilities.

Finally, the lack of cohesion in the western alliance in regard to Ukraine-related issues also represents a constraint. Notably, western support to Ukraine has been highly fragmented and is dominated by unwillingness of several major European players to aggravate relations with Russia over Ukraine. Some EU/NATO members, such as Hungary, have even been openly obstructing Ukraine's bid for integration with Euro-Atlantic structures (Sukhankin, 2018).

## **FORESIGHT ANALYSIS**

On the basis of the these constraints, three scenarios are possible.

A pessimistic but unrealistic scenario holds that Russia launches a direct military attack against Ukraine. In this scenario, following the rapid defeat of the VSU/VMSU and the seizure of the entire Azov Sea basin, Russia completes the creation of the land bridge between the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (L/DPR) and Crimea, spreading the zone of instability to Ukraine's southern regions, to include Odessa. In the short-to-mid-term prospect, however, Russia is unlikely to pursue this path. Although China's support is not guaranteed, given Beijing's evasive position, such a bold move would result in a complete breakdown of political and economic ties with the west. Despite this rhetoric, Russia is neither seeking this rupture nor risking further international isolation.

An optimistic-idealistic scenario envisions Ukraine strengthening ties and achieving some sort of strategic partnership with Turkey, Rumania and Bulgaria. This scenario is, however, unrealistic, given Turkey's evasive posture and multiple complexities associated with dealing with Rumania and Bulgaria. Indeed, although some progress in the area of military-technical cooperation has been achieved with these three Black Sea players, Ukraine should manage its expectations in regard with

attaining greater depth in those ties.

A more balanced and realistic scenario under which Ukraine's strategic planning will reconcile with the fact that the re-instatement of sovereignty over Crimea will be an extremely lengthy and arduous task, if it ever could be done. Kyiv should also expect Moscow to continue relying on such provocations and intimidation tactics akin to the Kerch Straits incident in 2018 as well as the sabre rattling best exemplified by the massive April 2021 troop and military hardware deployments near the Ukrainian national border. Moreover, Ukraine will not be able to solve the 'Donbass puzzle,' with the use of armed forces alone. In effect, under certain circumstances Russia may be interested in provoking Ukraine to undertake a military assault against the L/DPR forces. This assault – which Moscow is unlikely to undertake now – will legitimize Russia's military response, which could have catastrophic consequences for Ukraine. Kyiv has to also reconcile with the fact that NATO will be able to render only (limited) mainly non-military support, and in case of direct military confrontation, Ukraine's chances to withstand Russia's military attack alone are very limited.

## **IMPACT ON CANADIAN INTERESTS**

Geographical distance, low commercial ties, and a reluctance to spend more on having a more robust foreign policy mean that the Black Sea region will be peripheral to many of Canada's strategic interests. That said, an unwillingness to contain Russia's assertiveness in the region could have far-reaching consequences, challenging both Canada's and NATO's strategic interests in East Central and Southern Europe.

Specifically, some of these consequences could *potentially* include:

- Russia getting a free hand in the rest of Ukraine at the same time, enjoying more room for maneuver in Moldova, and Georgia where "gray zones" also exist. Prospectively, Moscow may be in its actions in the entire region spanning the Baltic and Black seas, leading to new provocations.
- Increasing popularity of Russia's version of "soft power" among certain groups in Central, South and West European countries. Even though pro-Russian forces constitute a miniscule fraction within domestic political forces – a situation that is unlikely to change – far-right and far-left forces could use Russia's successes as a "proof" of a "weakening West" in their anti-democratic domestic agendas.

Taken together, this could result in increasing fatigue, Euroscepticism and anti-Americanism within Europe. Needless to say, the lack of support from the West is likely to result in growing scepticism and revival of pro-Russian sentiments in Ukraine itself.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The current situation is not entirely hopeless for Ukraine. From its side, Canada could – by cooperating with other regional stakeholders and NATO members – play a deeply positive role in regional stabilization. Two issues, however, must be clarified. First, stabilization will not be achieved through appeasing Moscow and satisfying its claims. Based on the lessons of the post-2007 period, it has been quite clear that nearly all cooperation initiatives launched in the west vis-à-vis Russia

have been perceived in Moscow as a sign of weakness. Secondly, it would be counter-productive for Canada to pursue separate course of actions in the Black and Azov Sea regions. The key task is to secure engagement of the United States and Turkey [TO DO WHAT].

In terms of concrete actions, Canada can provide support to Ukraine that could be broken down onto two macro areas. First, it can commit to military-political assistance by way of:

- Conducting regular (naval and land-based) multilateral military exercises, drills and war games;
- Contributing to the modernization of Ukraine's armed and naval forces. In this regard, cooperation in the following areas is of particular importance: production of armed drones (Canada-manufactured optical sensors); artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics; electronic warfare; light armoured vehicles (LAVs); and sniper rifles.
- Launching joint projects in partnership with Ukraine's domestic defense industry (which still has not lost much of its potential) where the example of British-Ukrainian cooperation – the two countries signed a memorandum to re-equip the Ukrainian Navy, allowing it regain its naval footing in the Black Sea – could be used (Timofeev, 2020).

Second, Canada can offer diplomatic-political support, which can leverage Canada's "soft power" (ranked fourth in The Global Soft Power Index 2021) and positive international image – could be of instrumental meaning. It is important that Ottawa increases its role in the multinational "Crimean Platform",<sup>2</sup> whose emergence – despite Russia's ostentatious disregard to this entity (Latyshev and Medvedeva, 2021) – has generated a great deal of concerns in Moscow. Furthermore, Canada could use its diplomatic efforts in advocating Ukraine's accession to the Visegrád Group (countries comprising this platform constitute a part of the Black Sea Basin and neighbor Ukraine) and the Three Seas Initiative.

Ottawa could assume a coordinating-consultative role in the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, which will certainly increase international weight and prestige of this forum, at the same time expanding Canada's economic and business opportunities in the region spanning the Black and Caspian Seas. Finally, Canada's diplomatic efforts should be specifically concentrated around creation of collective security mechanisms in the Black Sea region (Simón, Lanoszka & Meijer, 2021) that would involve Ukraine, Rumania and Bulgaria. It would be highly desirable to engage Turkey as well. Yet, given worsening ties between Ottawa and Istanbul, and Turkey's overall growing assertiveness and understanding of its increasing influence in the Turkic-speaking world (Sukhankin (b), 2021), such an option does not seem probable for now.

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<sup>2</sup> The "Crimean Platform" is a diplomatic initiative of Ukraine. Its goals are multiple, including, among others, protection of the human rights of Crimean Tatars, environmental degradation in Crimea and some other initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

Ukraine has been able to re-gain partly its naval-military potential in the Black Sea region. It has attended to the needs of its armed forces and re-adjusted its defense industry to the new realities of warfare, while intensifying its cooperation with such NATO members as Canada. Still, it would be very hard to disagree with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that without NATO and EU membership – or a clear prospect thereof – virtually all Ukraine’s unilateral and joint initiatives will be of very limited practical value (President of Ukraine, 2021). Russia has and will continue to exercise complete military superiority over Ukraine. The only chance for Kyiv not become a target of new Russian aggression is to be firmly integrated in Euro-Atlantic structures. Otherwise, new provocations and even potential (para)military escalation is a matter of time and Kremlin’s will.

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