

# THE ROLE OF UKRAINIAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES WITHIN THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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**Abstract:** *The analysis of Ukrainian special operations forces' capabilities is an important endeavor in studying the development of the war from Ukraine – as a consequence of the Russian Army invasion, in February 24, 2022. The actions of the Ukrainian elite military forces contributed to the failure of the initial Russian military planners' strategic aims. National Ukrainian Army initiated the preparations to defend against an invasion force of the Russian Federation Armed Forces of 200,000 militaries, grouped in tactical units around the Ukrainian borders. Special operations Ukrainian forces had the significant role of stopping Moscow's objectives established at the beginning of the Russian invasion and of obtaining these remarkable results within the fights against the Russian army's units; they stood out especially within the planned action of defeating the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv. The role of Ukrainian special operations forces within the war in Ukraine consisted in bold actions behind the adversaries' lines, resulting in destroying certain command points and in eliminating several important commanders from the command chain of the Russian Federation invasion forces. Ukrainian special operations forces engaged efficiently the fight with the Russian elite forces that landed in the neighborhood of Kyiv and also blocked the military actions that intending to get the control over certain strategic objectives. Interrupting the logistic flow of the Russian Armed Forces, destroying the Russian logistic centers from Ukrainian and Russian territory, as well as organizing resistance cells for guerrilla fight within the Ukrainian territories occupied by the Russians are among the successful missions of the Ukrainian special operations forces. The endeavor of the current article is to analyze the Ukrainian special operations force' transformation process since 2014 – an evolution from a structure specific for the „Spetsnaz” and Soviet Union (U.R.S.S) to the current capabilities and modern endowment, driven upon a development & training program, commonly developed with special forces units from NATO armies.*

**Keywords:** *Ukrainian special operations forces; Battle of Kyiv; Ukrain resistance.*

## Introduction

The annexation of Crimea peninsula, which was launched on February 23, 2013 (according to Vladimir Putin – the leader of the Russian Federation) (Kozlov, Petr; Volkova, Olesya; Karpyak, Oleg 2022) has taken the Ukrainian special operations forces (and the whole Ukrainian Army) totally by surprise with the Moscow's security challenges.

As a result of the Russia-led military aggression associated to the hybrid warfare, Ukraine has lost territories. Thus, Kyiv could not exert control either over Crimea Peninsula or the separatist regions from SE of Ukraine – Donetsk and Luhansk.

Until 2014 – the moment of Crimea peninsula annexation – Ukraine inherited the organization of the *Soviet Union special operations forces*. Under the common name „*Spetsnaz*”, it comprised elite forces belonging to different force ministries. The most popular special forces structure – *Special Destination Police Force - Berkut* - is part of the Domestic Affairs Ministry and is specialized on neutralizing the riots within the country, as well as law and order enforcement in case of large social insurrections.

In 2014, *Special Destination Police Force – Berkut* has been involved in repressing the popular unrest known as *Euromaidan*, but it did not obtained the success expected by the non-democratic Ukrainian authorities, leaded by president Viktor Ianukovici.

Later in 2014, the new democratically-elected government decided to disassemble *Special Destination Police Force – Berkut*, as a result of their brutal actions against the peaceful Ukrainian demonstrators.

After the annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian democratic government succeeded to maintain, from the *Spetsnaz*, those elements that were loyal to the new Kyiv leadership. *Spetsnaz* units have been involved in the war in Donbas, successfully undertaking operations that defeat the pro-Russian separatist forces from SE of Ukraine, which intended to undermine the situation within the region.

In 2014, following the actions initiated by the Russian Federation in SE of Ukraine, certain successful actions of Ukrainian *Spetsnaz* concerning military operations intending to regain Kramatorsk airport from S of Ukraine, eliminating/detaining destabilizing pro-Russian elements active within Sloviansk (E of Ukraine), rejecting and chasing away pro-Russian insurgents who held under temporary control Donetsk airport, taking part in regaining Mariupol, and also isolating/arresting disturbing pro-Russian forces from Odessa (Butenko, Victoria; Walsh, Paton, Nick 2014).

Since 2014, Ukrainian democratic government has launched a reform program of all Ukrainian armed forces, including Ukrainian special operations forces. This decision was required by the disastrous condition of the military personnel, of the technical endowment and military training that made impossible a certain reaction of the Ukrainian Army to the security encounters initiated by the Russian Federation.

Within 2014-2016, a detailed analysis process of the military structures state has been undertaken, with the support of Western Europe military counsellors, to identify the main problems facing the Ukrainian army.

Simultaneously, studies have been initiated, concerning the specific of the disturbing actions undertaken by the Russian Armed Forces in Georgia and Ukraine. Based on these two analyses, the next security architecture of Ukraine has been projected, to answer as effective as possible to the new security challenges.

Based on the conclusions of the Ukrainian studies regarding Moscow's strategy and pattern of action and in order to undertake destabilizing actions within the proximity of Russian borders, Ukrainian government initiated, between 2016-2020, with the support of Western partners, some major reforms of the Ukrainian Defense Minister, focusing on five major interests directions: command and control, planning, military operations, medical and logistic support and armed forces professional development (Collins 2022).

Simultaneously with the initiation of the Ukrainian armed forces reform, until the end of 2021, USA Government has provided targeted assistance, counselling and equipment transfer (2.7 billion USD value) to transform and support Ukrainian armed forces. The process generated modern, flexible, maneuverable, flexible, with the proper technical endowment, adapted to the new combat field and to the new security challenges (Collins 2022).

In addition to the initial 3 billion USD offered by the USA Government to Ukraine for armed forces reform, another military support occurred, weaponry (more than 23.4 billion USD) (Marina, Georgiana; Badea, Marco 2022). A great share of this military support has been directed for *Ukrainian special operations forces' endowment and training*.

An important transformation within the Ukrainian army process of reform was the adjustment of the Ukrainian combat strategy: it became more permissive regarding the military leaders' initiative within combat actions, on the level of military microstructure, achieving autonomy of the command chain. It allows the young Ukrainian commanders the permission to plan and engage military actions within a de-centralized environment, still taking into account the achievement of the superior echelon's general objectives.

At the same time with the reform of the military system, Ukrainian military Planners included, within the Ukrainian defense strategy, a development program on national level focused on Ukrainian military volunteer culture. Ukrainian authorities settled centers that organize and train the civilians - being thus ready to participate within the national collective

defense towards eventual Russian Federation military attacks. This strategy contributed to the Ukrainian population's effective mobilization against the Russian invasion blockage (Collins 2022).

## 1. The development of the Ukrainian special operations forces

Ukrainian special operations forces (in Ukrainian language: *Сили спеціальних операцій Збройних Сил України – Special operations forces of the Ukrainian armed forces*) has been created in 2015; it was planned to comprise almost 2,000 militaries.

Since the Russian troops invasion in Ukraine, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry supplemented the special operations forces with 1,000 operators. At the moment, the estimated forces comprise approximately 3,000 militaries; all of them graduated a specialized training military program, specific for the the modern, military elite forces (Momi 2022).

In December, 2015, the Ukrainian Army adopted the NATO organization model of the Special operations forces and settled the *Special Operation Command from Ukraine (SOCOM)*. It subordinates seven special operations regiments and three of them are supporting the Naval Forces. In addition of these, there are two training and education centers for special operations.

The decision of settling the *Special Operations Command – SOCOM* and to reform the special operations forces came as a result of the partnership with NATO Armed Forces and especially with USA Armed Forces. Another factor representing a fundament for SOCOM settlement were certain failures registered by the Ukrainian special forces in contact with pro-Russian separatist forces in 2014, during the E of Ukraine fights – thus requiring the necessity of reforming the military structures.

The declared objective of the military authorities from Kyiv, Ukrainian special operations forces were intended to comprise 4,000 operators; there was a complex recruiting, selection and training process at the level of Ukrainian Defense Ministry' fighters, in order to be integrated within the specialized structures of the Special Operation Forces.

The whole transformation concept of the Ukrainian special operations forces focused on developing those fighting military structures, suitable for a complex military operational environment, endowed with performant, up-to-date equipment, able to act in conformity with advanced fight techniques and strategies, specific for NATO armed forces.

In 2015, as certain USA military analysts predicted, there were enough elements to indicate a Russian invasion within the Ukrainian territories. This situation determined military instructors from the USA special forces and CIA agents to initiate a secret training program of the Units of Ukrainian special operations forces to undergo an efficient insurgency war, against the Russian invader (Borsari 2022).

Simultaneously with the common partnership between Ukrainian special operations forces and special operations forces from NATO armies, *Ukrainian militaries had access to superior tactics of action, already tested by the NATO armies within the theatres of operations*. They also had access to performant combat equipment – which represented decisive advantages within the armed conflict initiated by Russian Federation.

Regarding the technical endowment, the militaries from Ukrainian special operations forces have been equipped with advanced night light vision, allowing the fighters to operate efficiently during night missions, in comparison with the weak performances of Russian Federation's militaries on this chapter. The militaries from the Ukrainian special operations forces use encrypted communication systems, assuring the security of their communications. They also have performant portable Surveillance and Reconnaissance devices (ISR).

From the weaponry point of view, Ukrainian special operations forces are endowed with Ukrainian-made Fort 14 and Fort 17 pistols, Glock 17 (Austria) pistols, AKS-74U, AK-

74M automatic guns (projected within Sovietic Union), the assault gun Fort 221 that uses  $5,56 \times 45$  mm ammunition NATO type, Ukrainian assault gun Malyuk caliber  $5,45 \times 39$  mm,  $7,62 \times 39$  mm and  $5,56 \times 45$  NATO mm, Sig Sauer MCX (USA) guns, „Fort-301”  $7,62 \times 51$  mm caliber (Ukraine), Barrett M82A3 (standard code M107 - USA) sniper gun with caliber  $12,7 \times 99$  mm ammunition, PKM light machine gun caliber  $7,62 \times 54$  mm, patented in USSR, anti-tank weaponry system FGM-148 Javelin (USA), RPG-22 and RPG-26 (also projected in USSR), SAAB NLAW (Great Britain) and portable systems for anti-aerial fight (*man-portable air-defense system - MANPADS*) FIM-92 Stinger (USA) and STARstreak (Great Britain) (Momi 2022).

Ukrainian special operations forces are also endowed with SYCH M30 counter-sniper system (produced in Ukraine), which searches for targets, automatically detects masked optical devices and determines coordinates and distances to the targets.

Regarding the aspect of transportation technique, Ukrainian special operations forces use light combat vehicles *AM General High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWV-es)* and inflatable assault boats provided by the USA government, as well as *4x4 Kamrat (Ukraine)* armored transporters, projected to support tactical insertion, carrying up to 10 operators.

For information collection and precise target hitting, Ukrainian special operations forces use Bayraktar TB2 UAV systems.

Ukrainian special operations forces also uses JAVELINS and NLAW anti-tank guided ammunition (supplied by USA and Great Britain) and intelligent ammunition - Switchblade 300 (antipersonal) and Switchblade 600 (anti-tank) drone systems.

The fact that Ukrainian special operations forces took part in training activities together with special operations forces from NATO countries before the conflict from Ukraine, the adoption of NATO action tactics and combat strategies and the access to effective combat equipment contributed to remarkable results within the fight with Russian invasion forces.

Ukrainian special operations forces has been endowed with performant night vision devices and participated in common exercises with NATO forces during night time; this fact provided superior capacities reported to the Russian invasion forces – that lacked this important aspect.

In addition to that, Ukrainian special operations forces benefited by advanced encrypted communication systems that contributed to the successful missions, in case the radio messages exchanged among the Ukrainian special operations forces' operators were intercepted by Russian invasion specialized SIGINT units.

The Ukrainian special operations forces' organization, both on microstructure level or on the level of a branch commandment (in conformity with NATO countries), special forces operators' training to act within different responsibility environments (land or naval), their participation to advance training programs and dedicated common training with air components allowed the elite Ukrainian forces to gain remarkable successes on the battlefield, at the moment the invasion within Ukraine was launched.

Starting with 2019, an air component endowed with AN-70 transport aircrafts and Mil Mi-8 helicopters has been transferred from the Ukrainian Air Forces, in order to support the Ukrainian special operations forces Command. This component trained with SOF operators for special operation types of missions: infiltration, extraction, low height flight, difficult meteo conditions, night flight missions.

Another particular feature of Ukrainian special operations forces organization is the settlement of four *Informational Warfare and PSYOPS Centers*, with the headquarters in Huiwa, Brovary, Lviv and Odesa. During the training process, the operators from Ukrainian special operations forces have been trained to establish intelligence networks within the zones

of interest, PSYOPS operations, espionage, to found resistance and sabotage cells within the territory under enemy occupation.

In 2019, the *Ukrainian special operations forces Center 140* has been evaluated based on the criteria of NATO Reaction Force (NRF). It was the first time when a non-NATO unit has been certified by a NATO commandment as a Special Operations Force (SOF).

Thus, starting 2014, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence started a complex process of restructuring and modernizing the Ukrainian Special Operation Forces, in order to create a flexible and strong force able to adjust to different situations and having modern equipment, needed for the security challenges posed upon by Moscow for destabilizing Ukraine.

According to the principles that guide the development of the Special Operations Forces, at the level of the North Atlantic Alliance, the Ukrainian authorities understood that these elite forces could be created *neither at greater extent nor at the outburst of crisis situations* (SOF Truths, 2022). The process of developing and modernizing the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces was a complex one, extended over a significant period of time, requiring, according to specialists, almost 4-5 years for training elite fighters in the field.

Regarding the military logistics, the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces kept their highly performant equipment and technology, produced in Ukraine. Moreover, advanced equipment and technology were bought from the West, being needed for coping up with the new challenges of the modern warfare. I consider that the Ukrainian authorities adopted the strategy of providing (to the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces) both local weapons and ammunition (as a constant process) so much needed on the battlefield and modern equipment, which was bought from the NATO countries. The latter was better regarding its performance, but it had higher risks determined by transport delays which occurred throughout the entire period of the conflict.

## **2. The role of Ukrainian special operations forces within the war from Ukraine**

Since the beginning of the so-called Moscow's *special military operation* against Ukraine the main strategic purpose of Kyiv of combatting the Russian invasion consisted in causing an as high as possible number of casualties within militaries and combat pieces and imposing high costs.

Ukrainian special operations forces have been the most prepared Ukrainian military units that would have been able to engage in wear and tear fight with Russian Federations' units, because they have been trained to use a combination of guerilla tactics and direct actions and engagement methods of unconventional fight, against an enemy in numerical superiority.

Having specific fight action training, the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces marked great success in the fight for defending Kyiv, cutting off the logistic supply convoys of the Advanced Russian Forces, organized resistance and sabotage groups in the territories occupied by the enemy and killed the Russian military high-officials that were carrying out operations on the Ukrainian territories.

### *2.1. The role of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces for defending Kyiv*

On February, 24 2022, during the Russian Army invasion in Ukraine, the main fight line of the Russian Forces was from the North, from Belarus and had as main objective capturing Kyiv.

In the fight for conquering Kyiv, the Ukrainian defense Forces blocked the enemy at the suburbs of the capital city. The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces played an important part in deterring The Russian Occupation Forces, by blocking and destroying the advanced

Russian ground forces in the fight from the Kyiv suburbs, especially Bucha, Irpin and Hostomel causing significant damage to the Russian units.

I used the case study, as a research method when determining the role of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces in defending Kyiv. This enabled me to identify the two main ways in which the Russian Federation planned the attacks against the capital of Ukraine: the former from the North-West- on the Hostomel Airport axis- the city of Bucha- the city of Irpin and the latter from the North-East- on the Chernihiv Highway axis- the city of Velyka Dymarka - the city of Brovary.

Hostomel airport was attacked by the invasion forces during the first days, being a strategic target for the Russian Forces. Thus, the approximately 500 Russian paratroopers that were transported in order to take the control over the airport met significant resistance from the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces.

Russian military planners were interested in the city Irpin, located 21 km from Kyiv, due to the fact that they wanted to set up a base of the Russian special operations there. The Russian military elite of the 331<sup>st</sup> Guards Airborne Regiment fought in the area and suffered from great casualties during the fight with the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces. The Ukrainian victory from Irpin contributed to lowering the moral condition of the Russian Occupation Forces (Urban 2022).

The Ukrainian Forces contributed to organizing an efficient defense in the Kyiv suburbs. The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces participated as well, playing an important role in preventing the Russian forces from advancing in the capital of Ukraine, leading to the Russian forces retreat from the North of Kyiv at the end of March.

The Russian convoy, organized along 60 kilometers, was blocked at North-West of Kyiv by the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces. This is just one of the numerous successful actions carried out by the Special Operations Forces during the Ukrainian war. Thus, the enemy's fight actions were blocked by cutting off the logistic supply convoys.

I consider that the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces played a major role in defending Kyiv, carrying out direct actions upon the Russian Federation military troops or sites which were organized to capture Kyiv.

The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces carried out special operations to destroy, capture, exploit, recover and cause significant damage upon important targets of the Russian Federation Army. These kinds of missions were ordered by important Ukrainian political-military decision-makers.

## *2.2. The Role of the Special Operations Forces in fight actions for cutting off the logistic supply convoys of the Russian invasion forces*

Having specific training, the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces took up actions specific to the irregular warfare. Thus, they started the operations behind the enemy lines in order to cut off the logistic connections, by attacking and destroying the Russian supply convoys.

As part of the research process, I used the observation method, as a means of gathering information, concluding that the strategy used by the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces when blocking the Russian logistic supplies from reaching the Russian advanced forces was both simple and efficient. The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces operators launched attacks against the first and the last military vehicles of the logistic convoys, blocking any chance of either retreat or maneuver. Furthermore, the operators started destroying or capturing the means of transport which were blocked.

The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces fight actions against Russian logistic transport included organizing ambushes efficiently on the route of the supply convoys. This

kind of operation was organized in a timely manner, with the involvement of a limited number of Ukrainian operators.

As tactical procedures, the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces attacks against the Russian Forces during the ambush were carried out by using: anti-tank fire systems upon the front part of the Russian convoys, precise air raids (using drones or placing mines on the invasion forces route, controlled and detonated remotely by the Ukrainian operators).

Having used the attacks successfully against the Russian supply convoys, resulted in lowering the Russian Occupation Forces fight capability near Kyiv. Moreover, the moral condition of the Russian military was greatly affected, especially of those from the front units, which were faced with the situation of having to advance, but lacking supplies (Ukraine's "Explosive" Ambush in Occupied Kherson Region (Videos) 2022).

The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces acted efficiently, infiltrating and carrying out operations on the territory of the Russian Federation, launching attacks against military bases, destroying logistics, fuel and ammunition warehouses, infrastructure (railroads that were ensuring the military equipment transport to the Russian units located East of Ukraine) (Kuzan 2021).

I consider that the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces proved their operational power, being able to carry out successful fight missions in any moment and in any action area (both on the Ukrainian territory and on the Russian Federation). Moreover, they could fight in all kinds of hostile territories, having low visibility, at night or under unfavorable weather conditions in order to block the enemy's supply convoys or to destroy ammunition and other supply warehouses of the Russian Federation.

### *2.3. The Role of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces in organizing the resistance movement on the occupied Ukrainian territories*

Since the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces were created, the Kyiv authorities planned that one of the important missions of the Ukrainian elite units to be resistance and sabotage actions against the occupation forces that were controlling parts of the Ukrainian territories temporarily.

Against such a predictable danger, the Ukrainian political-military authorities included, in the National Resistance Strategy, a provision according to which the whole society has to contribute to defend the state against the oppressors in order to free the territories that were being occupied temporarily (White 2022).

The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces contributed to informing and helping the citizens take part in resistance actions on the occupied territories as well as organizing clandestine groups for sabotaging the oppressors' actions, as part of the planning process for defending Ukraine.

Without minimizing the role of the conventional fight carried out by the Ukrainian Armed Forces against the Russian Occupants, the Kyiv authorities realized that, along with traditional military operations, organizing resistance movements in the occupied territories is also important for carrying out insurgency, as a means of the guerilla war, this being a well-known fight action against such an occupant.

The insurgency organized by the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces on the territories occupied by the Russian Army in the East part of the Ukraine led to instability in that area and impeded the occupation forces in their planned actions.

Moreover, sabotage actions and bombings led to the Russian military units retreat from the area. This way, they were prevented from reaching the Ukrainian units. Thus, control could be restored in the area. The insurgency war carried out by the Ukrainian groups in the occupied territories greatly affected the moral condition of the Russian troops, by causing instability.

The Ukrainian insurgent groups from the territories occupied by the Russian Army organized a series of car bombings with the help of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces in order to annihilate Russian high-officials and also members of the administration imposed by the Moscow regime or to kill Ukrainians that cooperated with the Russian Occupants.

According to the Kyiv authorities, the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces contributed to killing 13 Russian generals in the Ukrainian war, as well as other Russian high-officials, from the Russian Federation Army that fought in Ukraine, having the required training in order to carry out missions of identification, capturing or killing military commanders.

I consider that the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces, whose basic training is guerilla fight, will play an important role in the military actions to deter the Russian occupants from the captured territories located in the East of Ukraine, by creating and arming Ukrainian resistance groups.

Another important mission of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces includes identifying, capturing and killing Russian military leaders (important decision-makers of the Russian Federation Army), which operate in the Ukrainian theatre of operations. This will play an important role in destabilizing the command process at the level of the Russian units that operate in Ukraine and lead to lowering the moral condition of the Russian military.

## **Conclusions**

I appreciate the research process regarding the role of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces in the Ukrainian war to have been an arduous one caused by the limited number of available resources comprising relevant information regarding the Ukrainian elite force actions in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Taking into account that the content of such information can influence the progress of the Ukrainian war, I have noticed that information can change in such a manner so it can bring further guidelines regarding the special role of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces, as given by the Ukrainian authorities, to deter the Russian actions in Ukraine.

Furthermore, the constant evolution of the actions and the sudden changes caused by the situation of the Ukrainian war make the subject of analyzing the role of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces an open one. New information and conclusions regarding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict can always appear due to the changes from the battlefield.

The success of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces in military actions from the Ukrainian war highlights the need of developing the Special Operations Force capabilities in the modern armies. The actions carried out by such well-trained forces can lead to significant strategic outcomes in conflicts or in important missions from the theaters of operations.

The success of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces is determined by: the chosen strategy as compared to that of the other forces, the training and the process of carrying out fight missions according to NATO standards and ensuring (within SOCOM) all the necessary resources for accomplishing missions.

The action patterns and the future organization of the Special Operations Forces within NATO armies will be greatly influenced by the conclusions comprised in the analysis regarding the role of the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces in the Ukrainian war.



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