

Ukraine

Berkut (Golden Eagles)

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former republics were left on their own to develop counterterrorist capabilities. This need has become more urgent in recent years as the rising problem of organized crime has taxed the internal security resources that would normally be sufficient to deal with domestic terrorism. Ukraine has responded by creating Berkut (Golden Eagle) detachments under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. These units were originally formed in January 1992 and were based heavily on the Special Purpose Militia Detachments (OMON) which dealt successfully with many of the same problem now facing Ukraine. The headquarters of the 5,000-man Berkut regiment is located in Kiev, with battalion- and company-size detachments based in the larger Ukrainian cities. It should be noted that the Ukrainian government has announced its intention to create an anti-terrorism center by the end of 1997, although this had not been completed as of January 1998. Should this facility come to fruition, it will likely bring with it the creation of newer, specialized units to deal with hijackings and other specific scenarios.

Panther

The Panther unit is an anti-terrorist Spetsnaz team operating under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). This group was founded in 1994 and is based in Kiev, Ukraine.

Ukrainian Special Operations Forces: An Overview

Introduction

Since the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine's government has downsized and reorganized its military forces while adding a new paramilitary unit, the National Guard, and new Special Operations forces (SOF) to those inherited from the Soviet era. This reflects a priority in Ukraine's perceptions of its security needs. While perceiving Russia as a long-term potential military threat to its independence, of more immediate concern is the country's internal political instability and

organized criminal activity. This article is an overview of the force structure, missions, capabilities, training, and future of Ukraine's SOF units.

Composition

Subordinate to the Ministry of Defense (MOD) are the Ground Forces Command, Air and Air Defense Forces Command, Naval Forces, and Special Operations Command. There are also various units directly subordinate to the MOD, including the National Guard and a Security Brigade.

Ukraine maintains a fairly diverse make-up of SOF units within its military and paramilitary organizations. SOF include SPETSNAZ, airmobile, and special-purpose military police units. SOF units in the military forces are subordinate to the Ground Forces Command and directly to the MOD. There is currently one Airmobile division and three airmobile brigades, one SPETSNAZ brigade and one SPETSNAZ regiment, and a security brigade directly subordinate to the MOD.

Paramilitary SOF units are found within the National Guard (which was first established in 1991), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVS), and the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU). The National Guard has a number of special-purpose units; one of these, called Scorpion, is a battalion that was deployed in early 1998 to quell civil disturbances and establish law and order in the Crimea. Within the MVS are a variety of special-purpose military police units, which were established over time since 1988. These include the Berkut (Golden Eagle) (see figure [1](#)) riot-control police (directly subordinate to MVS headquarters); the elite and more specialized Sokil (Falcon) police force under the Organized Crime Directorate of the MVS; and (within the MVS's State Protection Service) Tytan, which provides protection for both state and private personnel and property on a contract basis. The MVS maintains at least one Berkut battalion in each of 15 oblasts. Within the Internal Troops of the MVS there are also three special-purpose regiments on alert 24 hours a day. They were first established in March 1994 and are named Bars (Snow Leopard), Yahuar (Jaguar), and Hepar (Leopard). They are individually and jointly assigned geographic areas covering all of Ukraine. The SBU, which was the KGB in Ukraine during the Soviet era, has SOF units known as Alpha. Alpha, which is a direct successor to a special group within the KGB, is composed of two kinds of combat units—"storm" and protective—as well as support units. Alpha units specialize in hostage rescue operations, among others, and are in all the oblast directorates of the SBU.



Figure 1. Berkut Shoulder Patch

Mission

Ukrainian SOF unit missions vary and depend upon the respective command to which they are attached. SOF units within the Ground Forces Command have the primary mission of reconnaissance and intelligence gathering within the enemy rear area. The units within the MVS and National Guard, and those directly subordinate to the MOD, have missions that consist primarily of internal security and law enforcement, including support to antiterrorism efforts.

Capabilities

Ukrainian SOF units have the capability to airdrop/airlift personnel, heavy equipment, and cargo; however, SOF units (see figure 2) in the military face a number of critical factors that impact their capability now and into the future. While these units are considered the best trained, best equipped, and most capable force in the Ukraine military, the current economic situation does not provide for sufficient budgets to train and equip them with modern and serviceable equipment. Units use older, Soviet-era equipment that is in various states of disrepair. The Ukrainian airlift capability is hampered by poorly maintained aircraft, lack of spare parts, and insufficient fuel to conduct frequent airborne/airdrop training. As a result, the amount and quality of airborne/airdrop training has declined.



Figure 2. Ukrainian Airmobile Unit Patch

Training

Ukrainian SOF units generally receive more and better training than other forces within the MOD or paramilitary forces. Training consists of airdrop/airlift of personnel and airdrop of heavy equipment, and cargo. Much of the aerial training coincides with other planned air training to save on precious fuel. Training is conducted both at the independent unit level and jointly. Training encompasses direct action, reconnaissance, civil unrest, and counter-terrorism.

Ukrainian SOF units actively participate in training with other countries of the former Soviet Union, Russia, and its neighboring countries. Units also participate in training with the United States through Partnership for Peace (PfP). PfP training has typically involved small SPETSNAZ units from the National Guard and has taken place both in Ukraine and the United States.

Future

The future of the Ukrainian SOF units is dependent on many factors, the most significant being money. The government must first allocate a sufficient military budget in order that these units may replace aging

equipment and systems. In turn, to ensure a sufficient level of training to maintain the capabilities of these units, the military should set aside adequate funds for fuel, repair parts, maintenance, and training of air fleets and personnel.

Training with neighboring countries and participation in PfP will continue, as it provides two important benefits: It allows Ukraine both to advance its relationship with the West (NATO) and to maintain its ties with Russia; it also provides a good source of high-quality, inexpensive training.

Despite current and future challenges, Ukrainian SOF are an important part of the military force; they fulfill an important mission and possess a capability that the Ukrainian government would not likely want to lose.

Ukraine will look for innovative and efficient new ideas to keep and maintain this capability.