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# **THE INFLUENCE OF THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE ON THE MODERNIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES SINCE 2014**

## **ABSTRACT**

The annexation of Crimea by Russia in February 2014 and the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine changed the security environment in Europe and led to a new global confrontation between Russia and NATO countries. It has also influenced the priorities and capabilities of the military modernization in Russia. On the military level, the conflict led to the formation of two strong contingents in the Russian army – in Crimea and near the borders with Ukraine. On the economic level, Western and Ukrainian sanctions forced Moscow to cut its budget for the military industrial complex and consider import substitution, which will have negative short-term and long-term effects for the Russian army. On the strategic level, the Russian leadership began to perceive the probability of a direct conflict with NATO to be higher than ever since 1991.

**Keywords:** Russian Armed Forces; modernization; sanctions; conflict in Ukraine; national security; Crimea; State Armament Program

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has attempted to reform its armed forces so that they could give an adequate answer to modern challenges and threats. However, most attempts have failed due to different causes: lack of financial and material resources, opposition of the top brass, absence of political will etc.

The reforms launched in 2008, built up a broad and ambitious plan to change the whole structure and image of the Russian Armed Forces. Minister of Defense Anatoliy Serdyukov,

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who was in office at that time and is considered to be the main architect of the reform, emphasized its three most important components or stages: optimization of manpower and leadership, increase in combat capabilities and constant readiness, comprehensive modernization of weaponry and military hardware. Sergey Shoygu, his successor since 2012, only slightly modified this reform course.

However, things changed in 2014. The events in Ukraine in February 2014 changed the security environment in Europe as well as demonstrated the abilities of the new Russian army. After the victory of Euromaidan revolution in Kyiv, Russia occupied and annexed Crimea, conducting a swift and almost bloodless military operation. After Crimea, Russia started a proxy war in Donbas, Eastern Ukraine, inspiring the civil standoff and supplying it with money, weapons, military hardware and “volunteers”, who are often soldiers and officers of the Russian Armed Forces.

A new confrontation began between Russia and NATO members. The annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbas resulted in massive sanctions of the Western countries and Ukraine against Russia. As a countermeasure, Russia banned the import of numerous products from the US and EU. Old economic ties with Ukraine, which had existed as a legacy of the Soviet common national economy, were broken in most spheres. These events had a strong negative effect on the Russian financial, industrial and energy sectors, but also the military industrial complex, which faced the need to fulfil the most ambitious State Armament Program of the post-Soviet times in the conditions of economic decline and disrupted supplies of components.

Despite spending much effort and many resources, Russia failed to achieve its prime goals by now. The West did not accept the violent change of borders of Ukraine. Ukraine itself did not collapse and continued to exist as an independent state, persevering against Russia's daily attempts to keep it in its sphere of influence. Russian leadership had to rethink its national security policy both at the strategic and operative-tactical levels.

All these factors led to significant changes in the development of the Russian Armed Forces and their modernization, which I will try to analyze in my further research.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

**Research questions.** The topic of my work reveals the main question that I will answer during my research:

How did the conflict in Ukraine influence the priorities of the military modernization in Russia and capabilities to conduct it?

To answer this main question, I will research three dimensions of this influence:

- Strategic level – how did the perception of threats by the Russian leadership change after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of a new confrontation with the West?
- Economic level – what opportunities and threats do the Western sanctions and Russian economy slowdown provide for the modernization program?
- Military level – how were these changes in the strategy and economic situation reflected in the military sphere? This includes deployments and transfers of troops, modernization priorities given to the certain arms of service, scope and goals of military exercises, review of modernization plans etc.

**Delimitations and definitions.** There is a range of notions used in academic literature to mark the process that started in the Russian security sector in 2008: reform (Lannon, 2011), modernization (Renz & Thornton, 2012), transformation (Giles, 2012), restructuring (McDermott, 2009) etc. All of these can be considered appropriate as they explain different aspects of the phenomenon. “Modernization” is used in the title of the paper as the broadest one to include the reform process started by Minister Serdyukov, its revision under Minister Shoygu and State Armament Program 2011–2020, even if they get beyond the initial reform plans, announced in 2008.

The Russian Armed Forces are a complex and multidimensional mechanism, which is constantly going through transformations and faces numerous changes. The discussion of changes and developments of the Russian military modernization in this text is limited to those ones, which have been directly or indirectly caused or influenced by the conflict in Ukraine since 2014. For the purpose of this research, the notion “conflict in Ukraine” includes three components: the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Moscow’s involvement in the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine as well as the new political and security environment created by this conflict in Europe and the world. Other developments in the Russian army, which are not closely connected to the abovementioned components, may appear in the text but will not be studied in detail.

**Literature review.** The data sources, used while preparing the text, can be divided into several groups:

- Official documents – Russian military doctrines 2010 and 2014, Russian National Security Strategy 2015. The documents are mostly used to show the change in perception of threats and dangers as well as strategic priorities for Russia.
- Academic articles – texts of Russian analysts Sergey Sukhanin, Andrei Frolov, Alexander Sergunin and Western specialists Bettina Renz, Keir Giles, Charles K. Bartles, Gregory P. Lannon, T. Malmlöf etc., published in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *Survival*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, *Military Review* and *Moscow Defense Brief*. These articles give a chance to compare the view on preconditions and motives of the Russian military modernization as well as clarify different aspects of its implementation.
- Press releases – mostly from the Russian mass media. They include interviews of decision-makers (V.Putin, A.Serdyukov, S.Shoygu), op-eds on the reform-related topics, and news about the progress of the military modernization (ship launching, transfers of military equipment, statements of the officials etc.) as well as official press releases on the web sites of the Ministry of Defense or President of the Russian Federation.
- Analytical reports and policy papers from Russian and Western think tanks. Among the Western think tanks dealing with the research of the Russian Armed Forces the most important for the purpose of this research are NATO Defense College, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Atlantic Council, European Council on Foreign Relations, Jamestown Foundation, Swedish Defense Research Agency. Russian military think tanks are represented by the PIR-Center and the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies.
- Military databases – *The Military Balance 2016–2017*, *SIPRI Yearbook*.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. STRATEGIC LEVEL. RUSSIAN STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS IN THE SECURITY SPHERE

The perception of security environment and threats by Vladimir Putin and other Kremlin officials is difficult to study, because such a research should rely either on speculations from behavioral psychology or internal documents, which contain the description of the “real” state of affairs and are obviously classified. The only available option to understand the way of thinking of the Russian ruling elite is to study the published official documents, speeches of the Russian leaders and how they correlate with what is actually being done.

On the one hand, Russian military doctrine-2010 declares NATO to be one of the main military dangers for Russia, especially in the issue of “moving the military infrastructure of NATO member states towards Russian borders” (“Военная доктрина РФ”, 2010). The spectre of an enemy is exploited for domestic needs, but it appears in speeches for the international audience as well – starting from the famous Putin’s speech at Munich Security Conference in 2007.

On the other hand, the logics of Serdyukov’s “New Look” reforms in 2008–2012 suggested that Russia was not prioritizing the threat coming from NATO enlargement, if to say more, it considered any full-scale conflict with the Alliance improbable, even less probable that it would start at the initiative of the Alliance. The number of units and deployed personnel in the Western MD was decreased after 2008. New brigade structure created difficulties for mobilization in case of a full-scale conflict with the Alliance. Conventional forces had to prepare for waging local Georgia-style wars, quite in hand with Russian struggle to regain its influence in the post-Soviet space.

However, the situation changed in 2014. The NATO countries did not accept the violent change of borders in Europe by Russia and imposed the full range of measures – from massive anti-Russian sanctions to deployment of international military contingents to Eastern members of the Alliance.

Russia formed a number of large land units on its Western borders and created an A2/AD zone in Crimea, Kaliningrad and Kola peninsula. These developments show that at this time Kremlin perceives the full-scale conflict with the NATO as more probable than before. Of course, it does not mean that Russia wants to start such a conflict – the primary task for conventional forces is to be ready to coerce and demonstrate strength in order to avoid military confrontation with the Alliance. At the same time, if the situation goes out of control, military units have to be there to defend Russian national interests, even if it means to act offensively.

Changes are also reflected in Russian National Security Strategy (NSS). Last version of the strategy was adopted in December 2015 and included the latest ideas of the Russian leadership after the start of the conflict in Ukraine and new global confrontation between Russia and the West. Consequently, the current strategy is harsher in terms of Russian attitude to the US and Ukraine compared to the previous NSS-2009.

While the NSS-2009 contained vague hints about the threat of one-sided violent approaches in the international relations and the need for solving regional contradictions without extra-regional powers (“О Стратегии национальной безопасности РФ”, 2009), the new strategy clearly proclaims that the United States wants to preserve the domination in the world and therefore tries to hinder the “independent domestic and foreign policy” of Russia.

The US and its allies exert political, economic, military and informational pressure over Russia and even attempt to disrupt integrational processes in Euro-Asian space, where Russia claims its leadership. NATO and its “military build-up, endowment with global functions, further extension towards the Russian borders” is directly referred as a threat to Russian national interests (“О Стратегии национальной безопасности РФ”, 2015). At the same time, Russia asserts that current European security system based on NATO and EU failed.

Ukraine is not at all mentioned in the document of 2009. In 2015, the conflict in Ukraine is listed among the biggest threats to Russian national security and is, of course, depicted as a civil war. Article 17 of the Chapter II states as follows: “The support of the United States and the European Union for the anti-constitutional coup d’etat in Ukraine led to a deep split in Ukrainian society and the emergence of an armed conflict. The strengthening of far right nationalist ideology, the deliberate shaping in the Ukrainian population of an image of Russia as an enemy, the undisguised gamble on the forcible resolution of intrastate contradictions, and the deep socioeconomic crisis are turning Ukraine into a chronic seat of instability in Europe and in the immediate vicinity of Russia’s borders” (“Russian National Security Strategy”, 2015, p.4). However, Ukraine is depicted here as an object of the foreign policy interests of the US and EU rather than an independent actor. Therefore, Russia depicts itself being in conflict not with the Ukrainian government alone, but with the global West.

### **3.2. ECONOMIC LEVEL. IMPACT OF SANCTIONS ON THE MILITARY MODERNIZATION PROCESS**

Sanctions against Russia were introduced in March 2014 as a reaction of Ukraine, the European Union, the United States and some other countries on Russian illegal annexation of Crimea. They were extended because of Russia’s involvement in the war in Donbas and prolonged until now.

Military cooperation between Russia and other countries also suffered because of the sanctions. The US put on hold all military exports to Russia on March 28, 2014 (Жи, 2014). In June 2014, Ukraine stopped all military cooperation with Russia, including delivery of weapons and military hardware and joint projects in the military industrial complex (“Украина заморозила поставки”, 2014). On July 31 of the same year, the European Union imposed an embargo on military and dual-use products to Russia.

These sanctions affected the development of the Russian Armed Forces both directly and indirectly. Cancellation of a number of international contracts for military hardware delivery is their direct effect in a short-term perspective. At the same time, the sanctions also contributed to the general slowdown of the Russian economy, which loses up to 2% of the GDP growth annually (Калюков, 2017).

However, the main factor that hits the Russian economy hardest is the oil price, which plummeted from \$105 per barrel in early 2014 to \$35 per barrel in early 2016 and remains at an average level of \$50 in 2017. Such decrease in oil prices is not connected with the conflict in Ukraine, but it has a large negative influence on the Russian financial positions. This means less money for the national defense and security sphere in a middle-term perspective. After constant increase in the military spending since 2010, in 2016 the defense budget stagnated and then was cut by 27% in 2017 (“Путин пообещал”, 2017). The next State Armament Program 2018 – 2025 is also likely to receive less funds than the previous GPV-2020

– 17 trillion rubles (\$283 billion in prices of 2017) comparing to 19,4 trillion rubles – \$646 billion in prices of 2010 (АВЕЛЬЯНОВ, 2017).

However, we can clearly define the negative impact of sanctions on the current Russian State Armament Program (GPV-2020). Russia had to substitute more than 3000 components from Ukraine, including gas-turbine engines for frigates, helicopter engines, and maintenance service for strategic missiles SS-18 “Satan” (Russ. *РС-36М*) and many other smaller parts (“The Military Balance 2016”, 2016, p.171). Western sanctions also hit the capabilities of the production of military equipment in Russia. Import substitution programs had to compensate for more than 800 components, produced in Europe and North America for the Russian military enterprises (The Military Balance 2016, p.172).

Military cooperation and trade restrictions from Ukraine and Western countries are especially tangible for modernization of the Russian **Navy**.

- France cancelled the deal about two Mistral-class amphibious assault ships, which had to be delivered to Russia in 2014 - 2015. Russian naval R&D bureau “Nevskoye” presented a domestic variant of a big amphibious assault ship, but the possibility of its construction lies beyond the GPV-2020 (“В РФ создан проект корабля”, 2015). Russian substitute - “Priboy” – should be developed until 2018 and the two ships should be built in 2020–2024 and 2022–2026 respectively (Валагин, 2017). However, these plans look very unrealistic, taking into account the fact that Russian shipyards now experience problems even with constructing corvettes and frigates, not to mention the total absence of contracts for building any larger ships in the post-Soviet period. Furthermore, the only shipyard that built aircraft carriers for the Soviet Union is now situated in Mykolaiv, Ukraine.
- Corvettes “Stereughushchiy” (Project 20385) – Only two ships out of initially planned eight will be built in the 20385 modification of the project. Delivery of engines from Germany (MTU Friedrichshafen) was cancelled in 2014; they will be replaced by Russian engines of Kolomna plant with lower capacity. The 20385 modification will be shut down because of the problems with import substitution (“Проект корветов закроют”, 2015). However, in 2017 first corvette of the modified version of the project (20386) was laid down. It will be equipped with Russian gas turbine engines.
- Frigates “Krivak V” (11356 “Burevestnik”) – The initial series of six ships will be reduced to three because of the cancelation of engines delivery from Ukraine. Russian enterprise “Saturn” failed to develop an engine fitting for the existing project of the ship. The hulls of the three remaining ships will be most probably sold to India, but the situation remains unclear (“СМИ узнали о продаже”, 2016).
- Frigates “Admiral Gorshkov” (Project 22350) – Ukraine delivered engines only for two ships (out of four in construction and eight initially planned to be built). The construction of the ships is now put on hold until the development of a new gas turbine engine by “Saturn”. The series is likely to be reduced to six ships (“Третий фрегат спустят на воду”, 2016).
- Small missile ship “Buyan-M” (Project 21631) - Delivery of engines from Germany (MTU Friedrichshafen) was cancelled in 2014; they are replaced by Chinese engines without delay in production (Латыпов, 2015).

GPV plans for the **Aerospace Forces** also suffered from the conflict with Ukraine.

Ukrainian corporation “Antonov”, which specializes in constructing transport airplanes, was crucial for modernization of Russian airlift units. Russia planned to construct 60 medium transport aircraft An-70, 10 light aircraft An-140, 15 An-148 and unknown number of heavy aircraft An-124 for the needs of its military in cooperation with Ukraine until 2020. However, according to the decision of Ukrainian National Defense and Security Council, An-70s from the joint Ukrainian-Russian enterprise, situated in Ukraine, will not be delivered for the need of the Russian Armed Forces. The same situation is with An-140s: Russia will build three planes on its own facilities, but will not extend the series by another 10 planes, as it was planned before. Certain difficulties may with An-148 transport planes, which are produced in Russia, but use many components from Ukraine (Тельмахов, 2015).

Another big issue is helicopter engines. Russia has an ambitious plan to have more than 1 thousand new transport and combat helicopters put into service by 2020, and until 2014 it relied on a Ukrainian company “Motor Sich”, which specializes in manufacturing helicopter engines. The national company “Russian Helicopters” (“Vertolyoty Rossii”) cannot meet the demand of the State Armament Program, despite the significant progress in the last years.

Russia may also experience problems with air-to-air missiles for fighter planes. Missiles AA-10 Alamo are manufactured in Ukraine in Kyiv, another plant produces the seeking system for AA-11 Archer. Most Russian fighter planes are armed with these two types of missiles (Clarke & Sutyagin, 2014).

Russian military space program was hit by Western sanctions. In the last decades, Russia was struggling to develop and modernize its own network of satellites to make its GLONASS system work (Russian analog of GPS). In 2014, French company “Thales Alenia Space” put on hold the production of reconnaissance satellites for the needs of the Russian Aerospace Forces. Later the contract was cancelled because of the EU sanctions (Gertz, 2014). Electronics for domestically manufactured communication satellites “Sphere-V” was also produced in France and fell under the export ban. This resulted in the need to replace them with older “Meridian” devices, as the “Sphere” satellites became too heavy after import substitution with Russian electronics (“Import substitution made satellites heavy”, 2016).

The impact of cutting ties with Ukrainian military industrial complex is not visible for the Russian **Nuclear forces** now, but it may become a big problem in a couple of years. Heavy silo-based ICBMs SS-18 Satan (R-36M Voyevoda) were designed and manufactured in Ukraine at “Yuzhmash” plant in the Soviet times. Currently these missiles constitute almost 15% of Russian land-based nuclear forces and carry 43% of warheads (Kristensen & Norris, 2017, p.116). Now they need maintenance procedures to be capable of staying in service until 2022. Until that time, Russia hopes to substitute the SS-18s by a heavy “Sarmat” ICBM. However, the project obviously experiences big problems, as the pop-up launch tests of the missile have been constantly postponed since 2016 (Казак, 2017). It means that unless the sanctions are lifted, the SS-18s will be gradually degrading without maintenance service and the new heavy ICBM will not be ready in time to substitute the bulk of the Russian nuclear shield. Additionally, SS-19, SS-25 ICBMs, which carry 20% of all land-based warheads use Ukrainian guidance system from “Khartron” plant in Kharkiv (Malmlöf, 2016, p.13).

The modernization program for **the Ground Forces and the Airborne Troops** has been least affected by sanctions. The main reason is that Russia possesses integrated technological and manufacturing capacities for production of most types of military hardware needed for these branches of service, e.g. small arms, ammunition, tanks, IFVs, APCs, artillery, rocket

launchers etc. Some components such as aiming systems, thermal sights or anti-tank missiles were manufactured in Ukraine or France for the needs of the Russia army (Malmlöf, 2016, p.15). However, these components were successfully substituted with domestically produced ones.

In August 2014, the deal between the Russian MoD and the German company “Rheinmetall” for construction of the 333<sup>rd</sup> Combat Training Center of the Western MD in Mulino near Nizhniy Novhorod was cancelled. Germany did not deliver laser imitation systems and mobile control centers for the needs of the center. However, its construction was completed without foreign components and the center hosted first trainings of the Russian land units in 2015 (“Минобороны достраивает полигон”, 2015).

To conclude, Western sanctions indeed have a negative impact on the Russian plans to modernize its military, causing significant delays in delivery of certain weapons. However, they are unlikely to disrupt the general modernization capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces in the nearest future, allowing Russia to adjust its military to modern threats and challenges.

At the same time, if the sanctions remain in effect for longer period, the long-term perspective for modernization of the Russian military look much less optimistic. Russian dependence on Western electronic components will take a minimum of 5–6 years to overcome, even if they will be partly substituted by Chinese or Southeast Asian. Russia also relied on foreign machine tools for modernizing its military production base. Now most of Russian military industrial enterprises are under sanctions and will thus have restricted access to Western dual-use goods. The lack of Western machinery will cause significant delays in manufacturing newest technologically advanced weapon systems such as S-500 air defense complexes, T-14 Armata tanks, PAK-FA multi-role aircraft, destroyers and submarines (Cooper, 2014). Therefore, the new State Armament Program 2018–2025, which includes mass production of the above-mentioned systems and development of perspective modern weapons, is likely to suffer from these restrictions.

### **3.3. MILITARY LEVEL. REORGANIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES**

#### **3.3.1. REINFORCING CONTINGENTS ON THE WESTERN BORDERS**

After the annexation of Crimea and start of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Russia focused its military development efforts on strengthening troops in the Western part of the country – at the Ukrainian border. These efforts can be subdivided into two parts – creation of a new military contingent in Crimea and reinforcement of the southwestern direction of the “mainland” border with Ukraine.

*Crimean military contingent.* Apart from a great symbolic meaning of “returning the Russian land”, Crimea has a strategic military importance for maintaining control over the Black Sea. Before 2014, Russian military forces in Crimea consisted of a naval base with surface ships of the Black Sea Fleet and a naval infantry brigade in Sevastopol, two naval aviation regiments in Kacha and Novofedorovka and a couple of auxiliary units (БОЛТЕНКОВ, 2015). Immediately after the annexation of the peninsula in March 2014, Russia started to reinforce its military contingent, struggling to create an anti-access/area denial zone (A2/AD) in Crimea<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1.



In 2016, the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol received two Krivak-V (Project 11356) frigates and is supposed to receive up to four more if Russian military industrial complex solves the problem with import substitution of Ukrainian gas turbine engines. Additionally, Sevastopol naval base will be reinforced with at least three Buyan-M (Project 21361) and three Karakurt (Project 22800) small missile ships until 2020 (“Балтфлот спасают”, 2017). All of these new ships will be equipped with Kalibr-NK missiles, capable of reaching ground targets more than 2500 kilometers away.

The land component has been significantly strengthened as well. A range of new units was created on the peninsula, partly upon military bases, hardware and personnel of the former Ukrainian units. The newly formed 22<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps of the Black Sea Fleet united an artillery regiment, a coastal defense brigade, a coastal missile brigade and an air defense regiment under its command. The Russian naval infantry brigade in Sevastopol incorporated the former Ukrainian naval infantry battalion in Feodosiya. In addition, a reconnaissance brigade was created, directly reporting to the Black Sea Fleet command. Until the end of 2017 Russia plans to deploy a separate airborne regiment of the 7<sup>th</sup> air assault division in Dzhankoy (БОГДАНОВ, 2016).

Russian Aerospace Forces also got substantial representation on the peninsula. Two divisions – a two-regimental air defense and a three-regimental mixed aviation – were created to defend the sky of Crimea. They partly use former Ukrainian bases and equipment, but are being gradually rearmed for Russian military hardware. The air defense regiments, which received new S-400 complexes in 2016–2017, build up the first main component of the A2/AD zone in Crimea. The second one consists of coastal missile complexes “Bal” and “Bastion” in the coastal missile brigade. Together with fighter aircraft and sea-launched cruise missiles of surface ships, they are deployed to prevent any potential enemy from operating in the waters of the Black Sea and in the sky over Crimea. Similar anti-access zones are formed near other Russian major naval bases – Kaliningrad (Baltic Fleet) and Kola Peninsula (Northern Fleet).

*Military build-up on the southwestern strategic direction.* In February 2014, Russia conducted large snap inspections in the Western MD at the Ukrainian borders, accompanying its military operation in Crimea and preventing Kyiv from taking any countermeasures. This exercise engaged more than 150 thousand personnel from all military districts, 880 main battle tanks, 120 helicopters etc. Afterwards at least a part of these forces remained at the Ukrainian border for many months to exert pressure over Ukraine, while Russia inspired the uprising in its eastern and southern regions and then fueled the war in Donbas.

The reason for such an improvised ad hoc build-up can be explained by the fact that in 2014 Russia had actually no large land units situated within the range of 300 kilometers from the Ukrainian borders. The last big formation – 10<sup>th</sup> guards tank division in Boguchar, Voronezh region – was disbanded and transformed into a military equipment storage base in 2009 during the “New Look” reforms of Anatoliy Serdyukov.

Despite the calculations in Kremlin, Ukraine did not collapse and managed to contain the spillover of separatism and Russian intervention to parts of two regions only – Donetsk and Luhansk. For Russia, it also meant that it needed to strengthen its military component of pressure over Ukraine and transform its temporary military presence at the strategic South-Western direction into something more solid and systematic<sup>2</sup>. The implementation of these plans began in 2015, when the headquarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> Army as well as 9<sup>th</sup> control

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2.

brigade were redeployed from the rear region of Nizhnyi Novgorod to the city of Voronezh right at the border, where they had been situated before 2010. The redeployment of this army headquarters undeservedly received less attention in the media than the formation of the 1<sup>st</sup> guards tank army near Moscow, which took control over the existing 2<sup>nd</sup> motor rifle and 4<sup>th</sup> tank divisions. However, it was the 20<sup>th</sup> army, which united all relocated and newly formed units in the Western MD.

Main combat capacity of the 20<sup>th</sup> army will constitute of two new motor rifle divisions – 3<sup>rd</sup> in Valuyki, Belgorod oblast, and 144<sup>th</sup> in Smolensk, which are still at the formation stage. Each of them will consist of six regiments – three motor rifle as well as tank, artillery and air defense ones. These divisions did not emerge from scratch. In 2016, three brigades from the rear of the Western and Central MDs were transferred to the Western borders and transformed into motor rifle regiments for the purpose of their coming into being. Therefore, new 3<sup>rd</sup> motor rifle division was formed on the basis of 9<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> brigades and new 144<sup>th</sup> – on the basis of 28<sup>th</sup> brigade (“Западный военный округ”, 2017).

Besides, another military unit may appear at the Ukrainian border soon. Russian military leadership consider creating a tank brigade on the grounds of the abovementioned military equipment storage base in Boguchar, Voronezh oblast, and even reviving the 10<sup>th</sup> tank division. However, the results of such talks are unclear until now.

Similar processes take place in the Southern MD. In 2016 the 33<sup>rd</sup> mountain motor rifle brigade was relocated from Maikop in the North Caucasus to Novocherkassk, not far from Rostov-on-Don. This brigade is currently being developed into a new 150<sup>th</sup> motor rifle division, which will be therefore situated in the operational rear of two Russia-backed separatist enclaves in the eastern Ukraine.

A newly restored 8<sup>th</sup> Army in Novocherkassk will take control over this division and a couple of other combat support units. It is the only army in the Russian military with only one large combat unit in its composition. This fact allows us to assume that this army will be de-facto in charge of the separatists’ 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps in Donetsk and Luhansk, which were previously coordinated by the Center of Territorial Troops and even directly by officers in the HQ of the Southern MD (“Реорганизация 12 командования резерву”, 2015). Units of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army are also likely to act as operational reserve and provide direct support to the militants in case of any potential escalation of the conflict.

Additionally, three motor rifle brigades, situated in the North Caucasus, are also due to be united in the 42<sup>nd</sup> division (“Южный военный округ”, 2017). This region lies beyond the research object of the text, but it demonstrates a general trend for revival of regiment-division structure in the Russian ground forces.

Therefore at least three new divisions and a number of brigades will appear on the Russian southwestern flank until 2018 (НИКОЛЬСКИЙ, 2016). Such large reinforcement makes it compelling to research its motives. Russian officials describe the restoration of military presence near the Ukrainian border as a defensive and *reactional* measure. NATO military build-up in Poland and Baltic states, “militarization of Ukraine” (“Путин обеспокоен”, 2015) and spillover prevention of the “civil war in Donbas” are the official arguments for reconstruction of old military bases near Rostov, Bryansk, Smolensk and Voronezh. However, such explanations may be good for internal propaganda, but they definitely fail a reality check.

The main counterargument is that Russia and its recent activities directly caused and triggered all abovementioned processes. Ukraine began reviving and strengthening its armed

forces in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the Donbas war. The same did the Alliance with its “Enhanced Forward Presence” operation, deploying more international troops to Poland, Latvia and Estonia, which feel the most threatened by Russia’s aggressive behavior. Finally, the conflict in Donbas was mainly inspired and generously supported by Russia, which sent its money, weapons and “volunteers” to fight against the Ukrainian government forces. Thus, it was Russian *proactive* behavior, which forced other parties to *react*, and not vice versa.

Deeper analysis of Russian military and security policies allows defining three underlying motives of the buildup.

Firstly, Russia wants to preserve military superiority of the forces situated in the Western part of the country over the Ukrainian army in quality and numbers. This superiority is important to be able to exert constant pressure over Ukraine and detain Kyiv from any plans of starting an offensive in Donbas. In case of any “careless movements”, there will be Russian troops at a short notice ready to invade – openly or covertly – as they did in August 2014, cancelling out the initial success of the Ukrainian offensive and making Kyiv’s bargaining positions weaker.

Secondly, by creating large military units in the Western part of the country Russia sends a signal to the West that it will be ready to defend its national and geopolitical interests, including with military means. Taking into account Russian strategic culture and previous experience, offensive operations can also be explained by defensive narrative (Ermarth, 2006, p.5). These actions look even more formidable together with the plans to purchase more than 2300 new tanks and unknown number of other combat vehicles as well as constant spot inspections involving tens of thousands soldiers. Abovementioned facts mean that the Russian leadership perceives the possibility of a direct conflict between Russia and NATO to be higher than any time after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, they do not mean that Russia is preparing to start such a war.

Thirdly, reinforcing the Western borders sends an internal message that Russia (and its leader Vladimir Putin) is strong and prepared to defend its national interests from all threats, which now, as in the times of the Soviet Union, are coming mostly from the West. For example, formation of the 1<sup>st</sup> guards tank army itself is a double signal – satisfaction of the Soviet nostalgia (1<sup>st</sup> guards tank army was a renowned force during the WWII and an elite unit afterwards) and display of power to the West.

### **3.3.2. OTHER MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS INFLUENCED BY THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE**

*Reviving the regiment-division structure.* Before 2008, the great deal of units in the Russian Armed Forces was the so-called cadre-strength or “skeleton” units and military equipment bases, manned up to 10% of the wartime ranks. This structure was inherited from the Soviet Union and deeply reconsidered during the “New Look” reforms of Anatoliy Serdyukov in 2008. According to the reform plans, all “skeleton” units had to be eliminated, giving place to permanent readiness units, which should be fully manned and ready to engage into combat within a short period. The division / regiment structure was found obsolete as well, it had to be replaced with permanent readiness brigades (Gressel, 2015). These plans were successfully implemented in 2008–2012.

Serdyukov's successor, Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu gave up the idea of the "brigade-only" structure of the Russian Armed Forces as far as in 2013, before the conflict in Ukraine. At that time two "elite" units regained its division status – 2<sup>nd</sup> motor rifle division and 4<sup>th</sup> tank division, both situated in the Western MD not far from Moscow. Similar developments took place in the Airborne Troops (VDV): Shoygu stopped the conversion process of four airborne divisions and gave order to start transformation of one additional VDV brigade into a division. Nevertheless, a permanent readiness brigade remained the main structural unit of the Russian Armed Forces, especially in motor rifle troops, air defense troops of the Ground Forces, army aviation, Special Forces etc (Горенбург, 2013).

However, it was after 2014, when the regiment-division structure made its wide comeback to the Russian army. Russian leadership started creating big military formation, using existing brigades. Three new motor rifle units at the Ukrainian borders are divisions with six regiments each – 3<sup>rd</sup>, 144<sup>th</sup> and 150<sup>th</sup>. Three existing brigades in the North Caucasus were united in the new 42<sup>nd</sup> motor rifle division of the Southern MD. Former 32<sup>nd</sup> motor rifle and 7<sup>th</sup> tank brigades were converted into the 90<sup>th</sup> tank division in Chebarkul, Central MD. This recent trend suggests that in the nearest time we may see more divisions formed in the Russian Armed Forces.

At the same time, the number of active military personnel remains unchanged – around 1 million people on paper, 800 thousand in the ranks ("Численность армии России", 2017). Therefore, new divisions will not be fully manned, even if they are partly formed on the basis of existing brigades.

*Creating and testing battalion tactical groups.* The notion of battalion tactical groups (BTGr) is not new for the Russian army. First BTGrS were formed during Russian campaigns in Chechnya (1999–2001) and Georgia (2008). It was a forced ad hoc decision to overcome the lack of personnel and hardware and create more or less equipped and combat ready units. These groups often consisted of servicemen from different brigades or regiments. As a rule, tactical groups were dismissed after completing a certain mission they were created for (Сидоренко & Гурьянов, 2012).

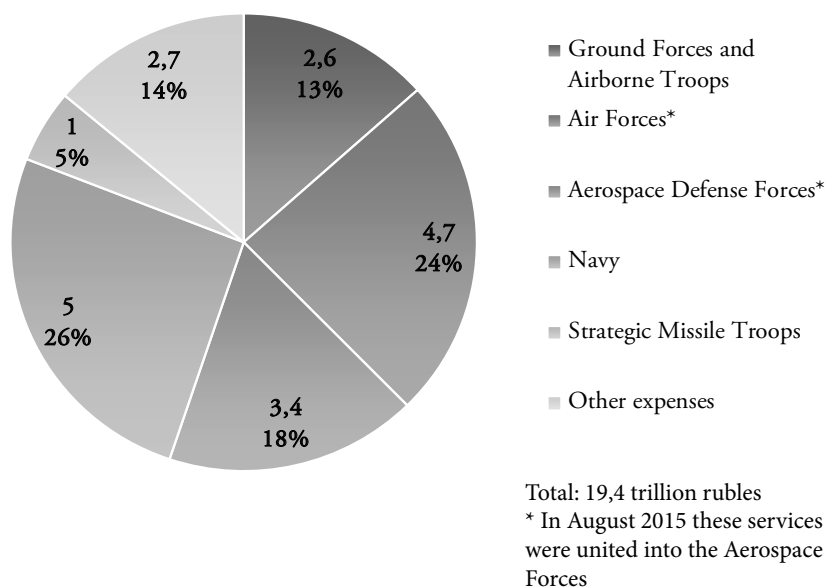
Modern image of battalion tactical groups appeared in 2012, partly because of the inability to maintain fully manned and equipped brigades, envisaged by the "New Look" reforms of 2008 – 2012. They were created as more or less permanent units in each brigade of the Ground Forces and Airborne Troops. These BTGrS had to be fully manned with professional servicemen ("kontrantniki") with the experience of participation in real combat actions (Сидоренко & Гурьянов, 2012). However, the idea was fully revived after successful deployment of Russian BTGrS during the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Russia directly deployed large numbers of its troops in Donbas twice – in August 2014 during the battle of Ilovaik and in February 2015 during the battle for Debaltseve. Both times BTGrS were main operational units, which brought victory over Kyiv's government forces. In 2014, airborne and motor rifle tactical groups reversed the initial success of the Ukrainian army's offensive and caused its heaviest defeat near the town of Ilovaik. In 2015, Russian tank and motor rifle BTGrS together with the local militants took control over the Ukrainian foothold around the city of Debaltseve (Czyperski et al., 2015). US military expert Amos C. Fox argues that "as the Russian-Ukrainian War illustrates, the battalion tactical group has proven to be a uniquely responsive and effective tool for conducting siege warfare" (Fox, 2017).

Positive experience during the conflict in Ukraine led to further development of the idea of battalion tactical groups in the Russian army. According to Russian Chief of Staff Valeriy Gerasimov, each brigade or regiment had to be able to maintain two combat ready BTGRs, fully manned with contract service personnel – 700 to 900 servicemen each. Therefore, the number of these groups should double from 66 in early 2016 to 125 in 2018.

Battalion tactical groups in the Russian army do not have fixed structure. Motor rifle BTGRs may consist of 2–3 motor rifle companies, a tank company, artillery and MRL companies. It looks like a full-strength battalion, reinforced with artillery (“The Military Balance 2017”, 2017, p.184).

*Priority for airborne and ground forces.* The existing Russian State Armament Program 2011–2020 (GPV-2020) has a clear priority for the Navy and the Aerospace Forces

Chart 1. State Armament Program 2011–2020



Source: Совещание по выполнению госпрограммы вооружения в части оснащения Сухопутных войск и ВДВ (2012, July 3). Президент России. Retrieved November 19, 2017, from <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15868>

The new GPV-2025 has to be adopted until the end of 2018, and even then it will be mostly classified. However, in May 2017, Putin hosted three meetings about rearmament and modernization problems of the Russian military, which shed some light on the priorities of the program. First meeting was devoted to Ground Forces and Airborne Troops, which will get the most attention in 2018–2025. According to a representative of the Russian Military Industrial Commission, the experience of recent conflicts demonstrates the need for prioritized rearmament of land units, as they carry the heaviest burden on the battlefield

(Никольський, 2017). This conclusion was based on the experience of the Russian military in the conflict in Ukraine and, to a lesser extent – Syria. While in Syria the Russian Armed Forces mostly used its naval and air units, in Ukraine motor rifle and airborne troops carried out most of the missions.

Modernization of the Aerospace Forces, the Strategic Missile Troops and the Navy was discussed during one meeting only, which demonstrates their secondary role in the new GPV. The main task for the Missile Troops is to ensure the development of a new heavy ICBM “Sarmat” on time, which should substitute the existing silo-based missiles “Voyevoda”. Until now, the development has suffered many problems, which result in constant postponement of launch tests (“Производство баллистических ракет”, 2017).

Russian military and civilian space programs were discussed separately due to huge problems caused by Western sanctions and particularly export ban on electronics for Russian satellites and launch vehicle systems.

*Training ground.* The war in Donbas gave Russian military leadership an opportunity to test its land units and new weapons in a real combat. According to Keir Giles, expert on Russian military, “Ukraine, in particular, has provided Russia with valuable experience fighting a contemporary enemy of comparable capability, in combat involving heavy use of main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Defensive aids and reactive armor have been tested in action against modern anti-armor weapons” (Giles, 2017).

Another important issue was testing the new means of electronic warfare. Russia tested and widely used its newest electronic warfare stations such as “Leer-3” (GSM-signal depression station), “Borisoglebsk-2” (electronic signal depression station), “Zhytel” (automatic jamming station), “Torn” (electronic warfare station) etc (Sukhanin, 2017). All these complexes were put into service after 2010 and therefore it was their first use in combat conditions. Electronic warfare stations proved highly effective in three main tasks during the active phase of the conflict in Donbas:

- identification of radio emission sources and locations of command posts and positions of Ukrainian government forces;
- jamming of communication and control lines, as well as blocking the operation of GSM-mobile communication devices and the Internet;
- distribution of disinformation messages (Гусаров, 2016).

All abovementioned military developments have been deeply influenced by the conflict in Ukraine. Some of them, such as reinforcement of Crimean military contingent or formation of new units on the southwestern direction, were directly caused by the conflict and would not have been carried out but for the events of 2014. The other ones, such as creation of BTGRs or revival of division/regiment structure, had been envisaged before 2014, but received a strong impulse in their implementation after the start of the conflict. The change of security environment for Russia caused deep rethinking of the Armed Forces created during Serdyukov’s “New Look” reforms, finally discarding the idea of a fully professional army and reviving some Soviet structures.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The conflict in Ukraine has a broad influence on the development of the Russian Armed Forces in all spheres – tactics and military planning, procurement of weapons and military hardware, strategic approach to international security environment and the role of Russian military in it.

Firstly, the conflict directly influenced Russian military policy in the sphere of troops deployment. Immediately after the annexation of Crimea, Russia started to strengthen its military contingent on the peninsula – both understanding the strategic importance of Crimea for control over the Black Sea and preventing any potential ideas about belligerent solution of the “Crimean problem” on the part of Ukraine. For this purpose, an A2/AD zone was created on the disputed peninsula. Because of unexpected resilience of Ukraine as a sovereign state in the conflict in Donbas as well as Western unwillingness to accept the post-Crimean status quo, Russia also restored its military presence in the western part of the country – at the borders with Ukraine. Three armies, three divisions and a number of brigades were formed or redeployed in the recent three years to reinforce the so-called southwestern strategic direction. This military build-up pursuit two goals – exerting constant pressure over Ukraine and demonstrating strength to the NATO.

Secondly, economic sanctions from Ukraine and Western countries, imposed after Russian annexation of Crimea and involvement in the war in Donbas, had a negative impact on the planned military modernization activities. In the short-term perspective they led to cancelling a number of contracts for supply of military hardware and components, which put Russian military industry before the immediate need of import substitution – above all in shipbuilding, aircraft construction and space program. The demand has not been fully satisfied until now. In the long-term perspective, they put the whole modernization program of the army at risk if Russia does not cope with its wide dependence on Western electronics, machine tools and technologies.

Thirdly, changes in the security environment in Europe, caused by the conflict in Ukraine, triggered the rethinking of Russian approaches to understanding the international security situation. Despite proclaiming the NATO as a major threat for Russian security in the official documents and speeches, in reality the Russian leadership did not believe in a major conflict between Russia and the NATO countries, adjusting its army for waging limited local wars and decreasing military contingents in the Western MD. However, this changed after 2014 – aggressive rhetorics both in the media and the official documents, formation of new units on the western borders, increased frequency of snap inspections gives us grounds to claim that Russian ruling elites perceive the probability of a large conflict with the NATO as higher, though they do not intend to start such a conflict under existing global balance of power. At the same time, such perception makes Russia a more aggressive and unpredictable actor, and contributes to destabilization of European and global security order.

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## **APPENDIX 1. REINFORCEMENT OF CRIMEAN MILITARY CONTINGENT SINCE 2014**

### **The Navy**

#### **Surface Forces**

- 6 new frigates “Krivak V” (Project 11356)
- 3 new small missile ships “Buyan-M” (Project 21631)
- 3 new small missile ships “Karakurt” (Project 22800)

#### **Coastal Forces**

- 22<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps of the Black Sea Fleet (formed in 2017)
  - 8<sup>th</sup> artillery regiment – Simferopol, occupied Crimea (2014)
  - 126<sup>th</sup> coastal defense brigade – Perevalne, occupied Crimea (2014)
  - 1096<sup>th</sup> air defense regiment - “Osa”, occupied Sevastopol (2014)
  - 15<sup>th</sup> coastal missile brigade - occupied Sevastopol (2014)
- 127<sup>th</sup> reconnaissance brigade – occupied Sevastopol (2014)
- 501st naval infantry battalion of the 810<sup>th</sup> naval infantry brigade – Feodosiya, occupied Crimea (2014)

#### **The Aerospace Forces**

- 31<sup>st</sup> air defense division – occupied Sevastopol, (2014)
- 27<sup>th</sup> mixed aviation division – Belbek, occupied Sevastopol (2014)
  - o 38<sup>th</sup> fighter regiment – Belbek, occupied Sevastopol (2014)
  - o 37<sup>th</sup> mixed aviation regiment – Gvardeyskoye, occupied Crimea (2014)
  - o 39<sup>th</sup> helicopter regiment – Dzhankoy, occupied Crimea (2014)

#### **Airborne Troops**

- 97<sup>th</sup> regiment of the 7<sup>th</sup> air assault division – Dzhankoy, occupied Crimea (planned in 2018)

## **APPENDIX 2. NEW AND REDEPLOYED UNITS ON RUSSIA'S WESTERN BORDERS**

### **Western MD**

1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army (Odintsovo, Moscow oblast) – formed in 2015-2016

20<sup>th</sup> Army (Voronezh) – redeployed from Nizhniy Novgorod towards the Western borders in 2015

3<sup>rd</sup> motor rifle division (Boguchar, Voronezh oblast) – in formation stage till 2018

– 9<sup>th</sup> motor rifle brigade (Boguchar, Voronezh oblast) – transferred from Nizhniy Novgorod in 2015

– 23<sup>rd</sup> motor rifle brigade (Valuyki, Belgorod oblast) – transferred from Samara in 2016

144<sup>th</sup> motor rifle division (Yelna, Smolensk oblast) – in formation stage till late 2017

– 28<sup>th</sup> motor rifle brigade (Klintsy, Bryansk oblast) – transferred from Yekaterinburg in 2016

1<sup>st</sup> tank brigade (Boguchar, Voronezh oblast) – restored after 2014

### **Southern MD**

8<sup>th</sup> Army (Novocherkassk, Rostov oblast) – is formed since early 2017

150<sup>th</sup> motor rifle division (Novocherkassk, Rostov oblast) – in formation stage till 2018

– 33<sup>rd</sup> motor rifle brigade (Novocherkassk, Rostov oblast) – transferred from Maikop in 2015