

Review article

## Territorial defense forces in hybrid warfare in the light of experience of the conflict in Ukraine

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### ABSTRACT

One of the experiences of the initial stages of the development of the eastern Ukraine conflict was the decision of the authorities in Kyiv to establish the so-called volunteer battalions (BTRO) and, among them, the territorial defense battalions. This article presents synthetically the tasks set for the above military formations. The authors consider which of the BTRO designed capabilities can be useful and effective against an aggressor using hybrid combat methods. They refer primarily to the course of events taking place during the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. The authors discuss the capabilities of territorial defense subunits of the Armed Forces of Ukraine that can effectively defend against hybrid warfare. While looking to answer the question presented, materials and articles on current Russian war preparation and warfare concepts were analyzed. Attention was primarily paid to their practical application during the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Subsequently, documents and publications related to the creation and tasks posed to the Territorial Defense Battalions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces were examined. Assumptions concerning their organization and functioning were considered in the context of achieving the designed operational capabilities.

The summary presents the conclusions of the compilation of the above work. They concern particularly the concept of territorial application of the discussed military formations, the possibility of their establishing cooperation with regular subunits of the Armed Forces to supplement their ability to perform tasks, as well as issues related to cooperation with local authorities and communities.

### KEYWORDS

hybrid warfare, territorial defense forces, Ukraine

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## Introduction

Many of the armed conflicts fought in recent years provide examples of a supposedly new approach to the preparation and conduct of war. It manifests itself in applying coordinated, diverse forms of influence on the enemy state. The object of the aggressor's attack is, first and foremost, the society and the administrative structures of the enemy, striving to create internal instability and chaos. Simultaneously, the direct use of military means in this type of conflict is limited to the necessary minimum. Regular subunits of the Armed Forces usually enter the fray only in its final phase. The new approach to carrying out armed aggression is called hybrid warfare by many analysts.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine, among others, fits into this manner of conducting military operations. Both the course of the annexation of Crimea and the fighting taking place in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions represent, in practice, the realization of the fundamental principles of the so-called hybrid war. Examples of the above-mentioned military actions, especially with the overt or presumed participation of the Russian Federation, are particularly significant for Eastern European countries, including Poland. It cannot be ruled out that similar events may take place on their territory in the future.

Given the threats to state security in early 2014, under the then combat conditions, the Ukrainian authorities decided to establish volunteer battalions, including Territorial Defense Battalions (BTRO). This article presents synthetically the tasks set for the above military formations. The authors consider which of the BTRO designed capabilities can be useful and effective against an aggressor using hybrid combat methods. In doing so, they refer primarily to the course of events taking place during the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula they refer primarily to the course of events taking place during the conflict in eastern Ukraine (in 2014-2015) and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.

During their analysis, the authors attempt to answer the research question: what capabilities of the territorial defense subunits of the Ukrainian Armed Forces can effectively defend against hybrid warfare?

Materials and articles on current Russian concepts of war preparation and warfare were analyzed when seeking an answer to the question presented. Attention was paid to their practical application during the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Subsequently, documents and publications related to the creation and tasks set for the Territorial Defense Battalions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine were examined. Assumptions concerning their organization and functioning were considered in the aspect of the possible achievement of the designed operational capabilities. Selected experiences of employing the above battalions in military operations were also analyzed. Finally, conclusions from the compilation of the above work are presented.

## The Gerasimov doctrine of warfare

Many contemporary armed conflicts, especially those that have taken place since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, present a new approach to conducting a war. Carl von Clausewitz claimed that "every age has its kind of war, with its limitations and perception" [1, p. 593]. Even today, significant trends can be distinguished in the area of armed conflicts. First, they are conducted on a limited scale, without official declaration, as intra-state conflicts (civil wars) arising from the inspiration of external forces. Increasingly, various non-state organizations are party to them. Civilians participate in them, and the boundary between them and

soldiers is not very clear. Various measures of influence are used in those conflicts – both military force (in the form of military units, armed civilians, or special forces) and non-military factors (media, cyber warfare, political means). The objectives of the conflict are also changing. They do not often come down to the destruction of the enemy and control of territory but are also aimed at achieving destabilization in the enemy structures and then taking control over them [2, p. 39].

The juxtaposition of the combat methods has not been in principle enriched by new and unknown solutions. Nevertheless, attention should be drawn to their specific selection and combination, simultaneous impact on the enemy in many areas (both material and in cyberspace), and the utilization of the latest technologies and modern forms of information transmission (especially mass media, including the Internet, social networks).

From a European perspective, the conflict taking place in eastern Ukraine is extremely interesting. It illustrates scenarios that may threaten the security of NATO's eastern flank in the future. There are grounds for assuming that the military and non-military measures of impact applied there in the period of preparation and subsequent escalation of military action reflect the current strategy and tactics of the Russian Federation's aggression. Meanwhile, they are part of the pattern of warfare characterized in the introduction [2, p. 43].

On January 25, 2013, during a conference held at the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, Valery Gerasimov, delivered a paper that many analysts considered a presentation of the new Russian strategy and tactics of conducting military operations. In the speech mentioned above, he addressed the "new generation wars" that have grown up at the beginning of the 21st century and whose course could be observed during the armed actions (according to Gerasimov, following the "Arab Spring" or the so-called "color revolutions") in North Africa and the Middle East [3, p. 28; 4].

According to the speech mentioned earlier, the new approach to conducting armed conflicts manifests in applying various forms of influence of a political, economic, and informational nature on the enemy, and non-military means and indirect actions with the maximum limit of employing regular armed forces. These operations are to strike at the hostile state's structures, administration, and society. The aggressor makes efforts to divide the civilian population, create groups with separatist views, and exploit existing antagonisms. It can act in the international arena to politically isolate the target state and introduce economic sanctions that hit the enemy state's economy. It brings chaos and disorganization with itself and significantly weakens its potential. In the presented approach, it is permissible to use any means of warfare, and the most crucial criterion for their selection is the most remarkable possible effectiveness<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Conclusions of Gerasimov's speech based on: M. Wojnowski. *Mit „wojny hybrydowej”. Konflikt na terenie państwa ukraińskiego w świetle rosyjskiej myśli wojskowej XIX-XXI wieku*. Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego. 2015; *Wojna hybrydowa – Wydanie Specjalne*: 7-38, p. 28-29; Ł. Skoneczny. *Wojna hybrydowa – wyzwanie przyszłości? Wybrane zagadnienia*. Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego. 2015; *Wojna hybrydowa – Wydanie Specjalne*: 39-50, p. 43; M. Galeotti. *The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War*. In *Moscow's shadows*. 2014, [online]. Available at: <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/> [Accessed: July 2019]; R. McDermott. *Myth and Reality – A Net Assessment of Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare' Strategy Since the Start of 2014*. Eurasia Daily Monitor. 2014; 11, [online]. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/myth-and-reality-a-net-assessment-of-russias-hybrid-warfare-strategy-since-the-start-of-2014-part-one/> [Accessed: July 2019]; M.K. McKew. *The Gerasimov Doctrine*. Politico. 2017, [online]. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/new-battles-cyberwarfare-russia/> [Accessed: July 2019].

The initial stage of the conflict can hardly be defined as a war – the aggressor must at this time skillfully use the possessed means of combat so that the overall situation in the region of engagement balances on the border between war and peace (has the character of an internal problem of a given state). According to the “Gerasimov’s concept”, special forces play an important role in carrying out this kind of operation. They are introduced into the enemy’s territory in small groups. Through irregular action tactics, they undertake diversionary actions, strikes against critical infrastructure objects and local administration structures. These actions are prepared secretly, without revealing the aggressor’s identity, to overpower the attacked state’s potential by means of precise strikes on key elements of infrastructure in the entire enemy territory. At the same time, there is an impact on society through disinformation and propaganda campaigns conducted on many levels to cause antagonism among the population, create an atmosphere of uncertainty and lack of trust in their own state structures [3, p. 29].

All the actions taken are aimed at weakening and depriving the enemy of defensive capabilities. As a result, the organs and institutions of the state under attack will not be able to perform their functions effectively. The aggressor will seek to take control over the most critical aspects of its functioning and keep it in its sphere of influence. On the other hand, in the event of the conflict escalation and the introduction of regular subunits into combat, it will be much easier for them to achieve their military objectives [3, p. 28-29].

Gerasimov’s speech should be considered as presenting only a general concept of warfare. That is since each conflict is a separate case, requiring the use of specific means of influence, and it is impossible to speak of the existence of any universal pattern. The preparation for combat, and then its course and selection of forms of action, depends on the enemy’s conditions, including its cultural characteristics, organization, and the way the power is exercised in the state, economic potential, and military potential.

## **Conceptual understanding of hybrid warfare**

Even though the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation did not use the term “hybrid warfare” even once in his speech, many experts and analysts do not doubt that the features of the presented warfare concept unambiguously fit into the definition of the term in question. What should be understood by the term “hybrid warfare” or “hybrid action”?

In general, it should be considered that every war has a hybrid dimension and elements. After all, wars are not fought in purely military terms, but rather in parallel in many other fields (e.g., politics, diplomacy, economics, propaganda), which support each other and seek to achieve the main objective of the conflict. Nevertheless, a specific hybrid mode of warfare can be identified, distinct from the “conventional” mode (“military-centric warfare”, for which military operation is the primary means of achieving the objective) [5, p. 3].

In a narrower sense, hybrid warfare can be identified by three key features.

**Decisions:** the focus of the intention to wage war on using a broad spectrum of non-military means of influence. In doing so, the focus of the use of particular means shifts flexibly to different domains. Domains used as means of influence include political impact, the cohesion of society and its morale, information activities, culture, psychology, etc. In this context, military means are not an essential tool of warfare, and victory in military terms does not constitute success in hybrid warfare.

**Operations:** it concerns operating in the “grey zone” – between war and peace, civil and military domain, and the internal and external security of the state. The ambiguities thus created

are intended to limit and impede the ability of the opposing side to respond to the conflict. Furthermore, these actions are geared towards identifying critical gaps in the enemy's security system to target the next attack. The overriding aim of this approach is to paralyze its decision-making process, have the initiative, and force the enemy only to perform reactions to the aggressor's actions.

Measures: using a creative combination of different methods of influence, creating a new hybrid in each case of such a conflict. Thus, it is challenging to identify patterns of action typical of hybrid warfare. This fact favors the element of surprise and significantly hinders preventive and defensive measures [6, p. 6-10].

## **The Ukrainian conflict as an example of using hybrid operations**

There is no doubt that the assumptions presented by Gerasimov, coinciding conceptually with the essence of hybrid actions, found practical reflection during the conflict in Eastern Ukraine [2, p. 41]. Considering its course in terms of employing hybrid actions by the aggressor, two different situations should be analyzed.

The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula was a carefully planned undertaking, preceded by thorough preparations. Undoubtedly, one cannot speak here of random, grassroots, or spontaneous actions. The preparation for capturing the peninsula included a thorough reconnaissance of the enemy and the area of operations. Launching the above operations was greatly facilitated by the stationing of the Black Sea Fleet units of the Russian Federation in Crimea. They constituted an essential background in the implementation of covert preparations for the takeover of the peninsula. The number of Russian troops in the conflict area was secretly increased, and armaments were accumulated for future operations through the Russian bases. Moreover, these events coincided with the Olympic Games in Sochi, which effectively absorbed the international community's attention. What is more, the deployment of dedicated military units near the Ukrainian border did not arouse any suspicion, which was explained by ensuring the safety of the participants in the Games. These troops performed the necessary support for the actions carried out by special forces, penetrating the territory of Crimea in small groups. Subsequently, their combat readiness exerted pressure, creating a constant threat of escalating military actions. Special forces played a key role, organizing protest groups on the peninsula territory, inspiring and financing the activities of local parties and organizations, and intensifying separatist sentiments and tendencies [7, p. 219-249]. Besides, they conducted diversionary activities, and built structures of armed formations called the Crimean Self-Defense. On the night of February 27-28, 2014, one of these groups, presumably composed of soldiers and officers of Russian special forces, captured the local parliament and government of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in Simferopol [8]. That was the first step towards establishing a new center of power on the peninsula. It should be noted that the above incident took Ukrainian forces entirely by surprise, and they did not make any decisive response. The Crimea events coincided with the process of establishing new central authorities in Ukraine. The creation of their structures was hurried and chaotic, so the country was completely destabilized. Initially, no interest was shown in the situation on the peninsula. The commands of the Ukrainian units stationed in Crimea received no guidelines or orders as to how to proceed (despite their signaling of danger). The passive attitude made it easier for the aggressor and its supporters to take the initiative in the region in question [3, p. 32; 9, p. 58-59].

An information campaign (war) was broadly organized parallel to the covert and direct actions taken. Through various means of influence (especially the media, political activity in

the international sphere), Russia has sought to polarize Ukrainian society, manipulate information regarding the actual situation on the Crimean Peninsula, discredit the newly formed central authorities, and build a belief that Crimea should be separated from Ukraine. At the same time, the significant share of Russian media on the Ukrainian market and their ability to influence the creation of society's world view was used [3, p. 33-34].

After the separatists took control of the parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, further developments led to the formation of a new government that was unequivocally favorable to Russia. Then, based on a referendum, it was decided that Crimea should be annexed to Russia. Having gained a "legal" foothold, Russian troops entered the territory of Crimea, overpowered Ukrainian units stationed there, seized critical communication facilities, and took control of the entire area of engagement [8]. Thus, the hybrid war, previously fought covertly and clandestinely, moved to the next phase, in which regular Armed Forces played the prominent role.

The conflict, which developed in the east of Ukraine in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, should be treated as a different scenario of hybrid action. In this case, unlike in Crimea, there was no direct and overt involvement of Russian Armed Forces in the fighting. Here it can be considered that there was an uprising of local forces against the central authorities of Ukraine as a manifestation of opposition to the pro-Western aspirations and policies of change promoted by the new government. These forces proclaimed separatist tendencies by declaring the independence of the self-proclaimed republics in Donetsk and Luhansk. The above actions were inspired and then supported by the Russian Federation. However, it should be emphasized that in this case, the aim was not the annexation or occupation of the areas mentioned above, as was in Crimea [2, p. 46; 9, p. 60].

The Russian activity in this conflict boiled down to support for the separatist groups by providing armaments and military equipment (along with training in their use), providing logistical security and advice on command (including combat coordination of individual subunits' actions), and transferring experience in conducting military operations (irregular, tactics of combat in urban areas, diversion, etc.). The direct involvement of the armed forces of the Russian Federation was kept to a minimum. They used their reconnaissance potential to the advantage of the separatists. They demonstrated their presence and readiness for action by deploying subunits near the border with Ukraine (especially aviation and air defense forces, which effectively put the aviation of the Ukrainian Armed Forces out of action). In addition, there was artillery shelling on Ukrainian army positions from Russian territory. As in Crimea, Russian special forces also played an important role. Simultaneously, propaganda and information activities were undertaken, aimed at discrediting the Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian army and building a belief in the validity of the motives driving the separatists [9, p. 60-62]. The scope of the means of influence used, their coordination to achieve a synergistic effect, and the fact that all the above actions took place in a situation where no declaration of war had been made (as an internal conflict within the state) might attest to the practical use of assumptions typical of hybrid warfare by Russia and its adherents in the conflict in question.

In this case, the inability of Ukraine's Armed Forces to respond quickly and effectively was also exposed. The initial phase of the conflict in the east of the country revealed the inefficiency of the mobilization system and the lack of a relevant pool of militarily trained personnel reserves. The regular subunits had no training or experience in tactical operations in the local conditions. Above all, they were not ready to be dislocated quickly to a conflict region to respond effectively to a threat. The need to take such action was urgent at that time.

## The formation of the Territorial Defense Battalions in Ukraine

Comparing the potential of Ukraine's Armed Forces from the early 1990s and the period preceding the annexation of Crimea, it can be firmly established that during these less than three decades, they lost their ability to defend the state territory effectively. The Ukrainian Armed Forces did not have an adequate number of military units, its decision-making structures were not able to take timely actions relevant to the threats that arose, and the subunits were not able to immediately switch to combat readiness and enter into action in the areas of operational destination [10, p. 281-282].

It is estimated that in 2013 the Ukrainian ground troops could send to combat theoretically 38-39 thousand, while practically no more than 32-35 thousand soldiers [10, p. 282]. However, in the initial phase of the conflict in question, they were not capable of responding immediately to the threat to the integrity of the state. It was necessary to complete their mobilization and preparation for participating in operations in the east of the country.

Alongside the actions implemented by the military administration, aimed at achieving combat readiness of regular subunits, the creation of new military structures, the so-called volunteer battalions, began. The activity was essentially a grassroots-inspired undertaking initiated by the decisions of the Maidan Council and the attitude of many participants to the so-called Maidan Self-Defense. The first such subunits were formed in March 2014. However, the battalions were not organized under unified structures and subordination. The following types of formed units can be distinguished:

- National Guard battalions subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine,
- Territorial Defense Battalions (BTRO) subordinated to the Ministry of Defense,
- Special Militia Battalions subordinated to the Ministry of Interior,
- “Right Sector” battalions (the military wing of a political party – the so-called Ukrainian Volunteer Corps DUK) and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists OUN that cooperated in combat in the conflict area with subunits of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other volunteer battalions; however, they were effectively autonomous in terms of training and equipment and independent of their command structures [11; 12].

The legal grounds for the BTRO formation and training were provided by the Law on Defense of Ukraine [13] and the Decree on Partial Mobilization [14]. The subunits in question were formed mainly from volunteers, mainly recruited from the so-called Maidan Self-Defense, and partially after mobilization. Initially, the training process of the newly created units was not standardized and depended on the soldiers' level of experience, organizational issues, and equipping the subunits with weapons and military equipment, or simply on the urgent need to employ them in the conflict area. Practical and intensive field training lasted in different battalions from 2 weeks to 3 months [11; 12]. The formed Territorial Defense Battalions were part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; they stayed under the orders of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and were subordinated to both the Minister of Defense and regional authorities, according to the place of their formation. In April 2014, Chief of Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Sergey Pashinsky, announced the creation and readiness for operation of the first seven BTROs [15]. A total of 33 Territorial Defense Battalions were formed during the period of their operation (of which one – 5bOT – was disbanded due to negligence in the implementation of combat tasks).

Territorial defense battalions were designed to perform territorial defense functions, adequately to the definition set out in the Law on Defense of Ukraine. According to Article 18

of the above Law, territorial defense is a system of state-wide war and certain undertakings that are implemented in crises and include the following tasks:

- protection and securing of the state border,
- securing conditions for undisturbed functioning of state authority bodies and military commands,
- protection and defense of important objects and communication hubs,
- fight against subversive and reconnaissance forces, other aggressor's armed formations, and anti-state illegal armed groups,
- maintaining legal order in the realities of martial law [13, Art. 18].

It is worth noting that the above functions of territorial defense can be performed by several other state services and were not reserved for one formation only.

In the initial period of their functioning, the created battalions were assigned auxiliary and protective tasks concerning the regular army subunits. They were primarily to implement the protection of the rear elements of the combat subunits, fight against subversive and reconnaissance groups of the enemy as well as participate in technical evacuation and search and rescue missions [11; 12; 16, p. 279; 17]. It can be concluded that these battalions were not intended to be used in direct combat. Also, their organizational structure indicated that they were predisposed to carry out protective tasks. Moreover, they were equipped primarily with small arms, light grenade launchers with a small proportion of anti-tank weapons, and light motor vehicles. Nevertheless, it turned out that BTROs were very often used on the front line, alongside regular subunits, that is, in fact, not following their combat purpose.

Apart from the tasks of a combat character, the participation of the above battalions was also envisaged in combating crisis threats resulting, among others, from natural disasters, as well as the support of appropriate services in restoring security and public order or combating terrorist threats [15; 16, p. 279]. That aspect of BTRO activity was undoubtedly part of the situation in eastern Ukraine, at least in the initial period of the conflict, during the implementation of the so-called Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO).

### **Lessons from the use of the BRTO in the hybrid conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014**

In Ukraine, several government administrative bodies, such as the State Border Service of Ukraine, the State Police, and the Security Service of Ukraine, are responsible for protecting the state border. As law enforcement or intelligence agencies, the above institutions can play a fundamental role in countering hybrid modes of warfare. Their sphere of action includes responding to the adversary's covert activities aimed at building structures and facilities for later military actions and undertaking non-military, propaganda, disinformation, or subversive activities. However, they do not have relevant measures to counter military threats. In case of intensification of a potential crisis situation and its transformation into a military conflict, only the armed forces have adequate capabilities to defend the state territory [18, p. 88]. That is confirmed by the development of the crisis in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In the initial period of the Anti-Terrorist Operations until August 2014, police forces and the Security Service of Ukraine, with the support of combat groups from regular military subunits and the so-called volunteer battalions, were successful in fighting separatist militias. The situation changed after the conflict escalated and Russian Federation troops supporting the separatists invaded Ukrainian territory.



## **“In-place force”**

The experience of the initial period of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine showed that the regular subunits of the Armed Forces of Ukraine were not able to make an immediate response to the threats. The process of their mobilization roll-out and achieving readiness for action took far too long in relation to developments in the crisis-affected regions of the country. The Crimean Peninsula was taken over practically without any major armed clashes. Separatist subunits, largely benefiting from the extensive support provided by the Russian Federation's Armed Forces, took control of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Many experts stress that the further escalation of the conflict was halted by the rapid formation of the so-called volunteer battalions (including territorial defense battalions) and taking up arms against the enemy by them. That made it possible to stop the possible advance of the military operation deep into Ukrainian territory [11; 12; 19, p. 308]. While ground Armed Forces brigades were reaching readiness for action and could put at most battalion-sized combat groups in the field, hastily formed volunteer battalions declared readiness for combat much faster. However, the short training process had an impact on deficiencies in tactical behavior on the battlefield. Numerous examples are known when volunteers took risky actions against the rules of combat, instructions, or guidance of more experienced soldiers. Soldiers of these subunits gained experience and habits of combat behavior only in the combat zone.

Under the concept of their creation and functioning, at the time of their establishment (March 2014), BTRs were subordinate to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense and, simultaneously, to the regional authorities in areas where they were formed. Following the assumptions made at that time, territorial defense subunits were to function ultimately on the entire territory of Ukraine, in each administrative unit of the country [15]. Thus, they could constitute a resource of forces, remaining in constant readiness to respond to threats in any area of the country. Moreover, their soldiers were recruited from the regions of responsibility of individual battalions. It follows from the above that those subunits were supposed to operate in a specific territory, using good knowledge of its conditions in terms of conducting tactical operations.

Therefore, it may be assumed that if the afore-mentioned subunits had reached operational readiness before the outbreak of the conflict in the east of Ukraine, then the activity of the enemy's armed groups aimed at conducting diversions or building separatism would have been significantly less effective. It is also likely that there would not have been such a significant degree of surprise at the enemy's actions. When analyzing the course of the initial phase of the conflict in Ukraine's eastern regions (February-April 2014), it can be noted that the separatists' success was mainly due to surprise and the legitimate authorities' inability to respond quickly and effectively. The initiative at that time lay in the hands of the rebels.

It is clear from the course of the conflict in Donbas and Luhansk that volunteer battalions were the first to be directed to support local authorities in their fight against separatist groups. These included the 24<sup>th</sup> Territorial Defense Battalion (bOT) “Ajdar”, which began serving in the ATO region in May 2014, and the 12<sup>th</sup> bOT “Kyiv” and 40<sup>th</sup> bOT “Krivbas”, which performed their tasks from June 2014. The Battalion (later transformed into a regiment) “Azov” was recruited from the conflict area (the Donetsk region). Soldiers coming from nearby villages were able to use their knowledge of the terrain and local conditions, which positively impacted the efficiency of task performance. In addition, the attachment of soldiers to their “small homelands”, i.e., regions from which their families and loved ones originated, was decisive for maintaining motivation for action and high morale in combat.

## High motivation and morale of BTRO soldiers

Most volunteer battalions displayed high motivation to operate in the conflict area from the beginning of their existence. That was especially true for those of them recruited from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and neighboring regions. The high level of the soldiers' motivation implied their high effectiveness in carrying out tasks during the ATO. There are known cases when volunteers even demanded to be directed to the regions where the situation was the most difficult. The example of the 4<sup>th</sup> bOT "Transcarpathia", whose soldiers sent an open letter asking to be deployed in the conflict area, can be cited here. The literature also reports a situation in which the Battalion "Kyiv-2" commander refused to return from the ATO zone in the belief that other units would not be able to implement better the tasks set for them on the maintained section of the front [11; 12].

It should also be noted that the volunteer battalions became the target of aggressive attacks by pro-Russian propaganda. In the period in question, there was even a disinformation campaign aimed at presenting those formations in the worst possible light. That had a negative impact on the attitude of the population living in the districts covered by the fighting towards the volunteer battalions.

## Cooperation with regular troops of the Ukrainian Armed Forces

Due to their structure, equipment, and training system, BTROs, are not intended to conduct direct combat missions. According to the concept of their operation, they should fulfill auxiliary functions for operational subunits. That is confirmed by the examples of actions carried out by these subunits in Eastern Ukraine. Then, they were directed to direct combat with the separatist forces (sometimes supported by "heavy" subunits, i.e., armored or mechanized ones, with artillery support as well). In such situations, they often suffered significant losses, e.g., on May 23, 2014, about half of the Battalion "Donbas" was wounded in an ambush near the village of Karlivka [20]. What is more, on June 17, 2014, the Battalion "Ajdar" suffered heavy losses in fighting near the village of Metalist [21]. Nonetheless, it should be noted that there were many cases when BTROs succeeded in front-line operations, usually in situations when they fought with forces equivalent to them in terms of training and equipment or benefited from the support of regular troops (e.g., on June 13, 2014, the Battalion "Azov" participated in the assault on Mariupol that ended with the capture of the city [22]).

It should be borne in mind that the effectiveness of the volunteer battalions in combat depended significantly on proper interaction with regular subunits. The communication and coordination of operations influenced the effectiveness of the tasks performed as established earlier, the division of zones of responsibility, and the implementation of principles for mutual support on the battlefield. Mariupol's battle is one example of Ukrainian successes resulting from good cooperation between individual subunits.

In turn, one of the best-known cases of the misuse of volunteer battalions in the conflict area was the fighting for Ilovaysk in August 2014. After erroneous decisions, the lack of adequate reconnaissance data and perhaps also in the result of the ATO command's ignorance, the forces of 39 and 40 bOTs were directed to storm the locality on August 7-10 in the first wave, and the Battalions "Donbas", "Azov", and "Shakhtarsk" followed them. In effect, they suffered heavy losses without capturing Ilovaysk. They ignored information that the enemy had organized well-fortified positions in the city. Only the inclusion of regular troops in the attack made it possible to break through the separatists' defense and seize part of the city.

On August 24, the situation changed decisively to the disadvantage of the Ukrainians, when regular subunits of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation entered the fighting in the area. During the withdrawal from the so-called “Ilovaya Cauldron”, all the volunteer battalions engaged were broken up and practically lost their ability to operate, including one of the best-trained and fully-completed one – the “Donbas” Battalion [23].

The above case also illustrates the consequences of the lack of interaction between regular military subdivisions and volunteer battalions. After the “Ilovaya defeat”, the commanders and soldiers of both groupings accused each other about lack of will to cooperate and support on the battlefield.

The experience of tactical operations conducted by volunteer battalions indicates that they should essentially support regular subdivisions. The BTRO’s tasks in this respect could consist, among others, in introducing troops to their areas of responsibility, providing them with information concerning the area of operations and the location and operational capabilities of enemy’s elements (groups, subunits). As for acquiring critical information from the battlefield, they could complement the reconnaissance capabilities of regular troops. Moreover, BTROs could conduct effective counterinsurgency operations. That should be understood as the protection of critical infrastructural objects (protective-defensive actions), patrolling designated areas, and undertaking other actions of a preventive character [18, p. 108; 24, p. 34]. In justified cases, they could perform direct actions consisting in locating the enemy’s subversive and special groups and then liquidating them or cooperating in this respect with other troops, services, and institutions. By performing the above tasks, BTROs ensure the freedom of action of regular subunits in their rear areas, thus enabling them to concentrate their efforts on the main objective of the military operation.

It should be emphasized that a significant part of the tasks fulfilled by the volunteer battalions during their period of operation in Eastern Ukraine came down to patrolling activities, guarding checkpoints, reinforcing the state border, and assisting in maintaining public order.

### **Cooperation at the local level**

The conflict in the eastern regions of Ukraine cites many examples of the Russian Federation’s propaganda and information activities aimed at creating mistrust and even fear among the population of these regions towards soldiers of volunteer battalions. These actions were repeatedly based on spreading false news about events (reports of false witnesses) that did not take place. Consequently, the need to fight against separatist forces and the hostility of the local population arose. One such mission to build positive relations in the local community was the Battalion “Kyiv-1” support to militia (order) activities in the liberated Sloviansk. The above task was taken very seriously, despite the desire of the Battalion’s soldiers to participate in direct combat operations [11; 12]. There are also numerous examples of the Ukrainian society’s support in the BTRO formation and equipping. The civilians’ contributions and entrepreneurs’ donations allowed for equipping many subunits with the necessary military equipment (bulletproof vests, helmets, night vision devices, uniforms), which was not provided by the military logistics services [25; 26].

When summarizing the above considerations, one can state that the BTROs’ primary purpose should be to support operational troops and cooperate with local authorities to ensure order and security. However, they should not be treated as one of the elements of operational troops. Then, the local society will assist the territorial defense subunits with their resources, thus jointly building security at the regional level.

## **Conclusion**

One of the lessons learned in the initial stages of the conflict development in eastern Ukraine was the Kyiv authorities' decision to create new military formations, namely, the so-called volunteer battalions, including territorial defense battalions. The main reason for that, especially in the initial period of the conflict's development, was the need to introduce military subunits into the threatened regions as quickly as possible so as to control and stop the escalation of the crisis. Given the difficulties with the immediate use of regular Armed Forces in the conflict area, it was decided to mobilize and prepare for combat tasks volunteer-composed subunits. Only subsequent experiences and analyses of the course of actions allowed for identifying additional capabilities of the newly created formations. Some of them may prove helpful in combating threats of the hybrid-conflict nature, which we are dealing with in the eastern regions of Ukraine.

The BTRO's ability to counter hybrid threats is essentially based on two pillars related to their functioning: attachment to a specific area of operation and building a relationship of interaction with local authorities and society. Building a solid relationship with local communities is meant to guarantee the Ukrainian society's integrity, including hindering the creation of hostile, separatist tendencies in it, leveling the enemy's informational and propaganda impact, and maintaining their trust in local authorities and institutions. In turn, attachment to terrain means that territorial defense subunits are assigned to specific regions of responsibility, and soldiers serving in the BTRO originate from those areas. The latter determines the afore-mentioned formation's constant readiness to react immediately to threats, and the awareness of local conditions, consisting both in the knowledge of the area and the specificity of relations among the local population.

When considering the abilities mentioned above in light of the experience resulting from the Ukrainian conflict, it may be assumed that the realization of a similar scenario in the situation of the BTRO would be significantly hindered. The correct task implementation by the formation in question may significantly influence the real possibilities of ensuring the state's internal security, also when the enemy applies hybrid methods of combat.

When addressing the question posed at the beginning of the article, the authors claim that territorial defense subunits as an element of operational forces in the fight against regular enemy forces do not bring the expected results and even weaken the armed formation. On the other hand, employing them to combat subversive activities, ensure security in the region and support the activities of operational troops brings measurable effects in the hybrid war.

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## **Conflict of interests**

All authors declared no conflict of interests.

## **Author contributions**

All authors contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## **Ethical statement**

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.

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## Wojska obrony terytorialnej w hybrydowych działaniach wojennych w świetle doświadczeń konfliktu na Ukrainie

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### STRESZCZENIE

Jednym z doświadczeń początkowych faz rozwoju konfliktu na wschodniej Ukrainie była decyzja władz w Kijowie o powołaniu tzw. batalionów ochotniczych (BTRO), a wśród nich batalionów obrony terytorialnej. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia w sposób syntetyczny zadania stawiane wobec powyższych formacji militarnych. Autorzy rozważają, które z projektowanych zdolności BTRO mogą być przydatne i skuteczne wobec agresora stosującego hybrydowe metody walki. Odwołują się przy tym przede wszystkim do przebiegu wydarzeń mających miejsce w czasie konfliktu we Wschodniej Ukrainie i podczas aneksji półwyspu krymskiego.

Autorzy rozważają jakie zdolności pododdziałów obrony terytorialnej Sił Zbrojnych Ukrainy mogą być skuteczne w obronie przed hybrydowym sposobem prowadzenia

wojny. Szukając odpowiedzi na przedstawione pytanie poddano analizie materiały i artykuły dotyczące aktualnych rosyjskich koncepcji przygotowania i prowadzenia wojny. W szczególności zwrócono uwagę na praktyczne ich zastosowanie podczas trwającego konfliktu na wschodzie Ukrainy i w czasie aneksji Krymu. Następnie zbzdano dokumenty i publikacje związane z utworzeniem i zadaniami stawianymi wobec batalionów obrony terytorialnej Sił Zbrojnych Ukrainy. Rozważano założenia dotyczące ich organizacji i funkcjonowania w kontekście możliwości osiągnięcia projektowanych zdolności do działania.

W podsumowaniu przedstawiono wnioski z zestawienia powyższych prac. Odnoszą się one w szczególności do: koncepcji terytorialnego zastosowania omawianych formacji wojskowych, możliwości nawiązania przez nie współdziałania z regularnymi pododziałami Sił Zbrojnych w celu uzupełnienia ich zdolności do wykonywania zadań, a także do zagadnień związanych ze współpracą z lokalnymi władzami i społecznościami.

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