

# AVIATION

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**UKRAINIAN ARMED FORCES**



# An Overview of Ukrainian Armed Forces

*Text and photography by Patrick Dirksen and Frank Mink of Tristar Aviation*

**The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting war prompted us to give an overview of the flying branches of the Zbroynykh Syl Ukrayiny or Ukrainian Armed Forces. We will focus on operational units (fighters, transport etc.), while training units are outside the scope of this overview.**

## **Brief history**

In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved, and Ukraine became independent. Many former Soviet Air Force aircraft and helicopters remained in Ukraine as payment for the debts of the Soviet government; some 1,500 in total. However, due to a lack of pilots and maintenance personnel, many of these were quickly withdrawn from service. In 2003, a large reorganisation took place, which meant closure of a range of airbases and withdrawal of more aircraft types (e.g. Tu-22, MiG-23, MiG-25, Su-15 and Su-17 of the air force, Yak-38 and Ka-25 of the navy as well as Mi-2 and Mi-6 helicopters of the army). Many of the remaining aircraft, however, went through an extensive modernization programme, which made more aircraft available for use. Also, the amount of hours flown by pilots increased, all of this improving the readiness of the armed forces. After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, dozens more aircraft have been overhauled, modernized, and returned to service. These even included two An-26 transport aircraft that have been fully overhauled by volunteers, after the aircraft had been in storage for years. One of those has been fittingly named 'Phoenix'. Furthermore, new aircraft and especially helicopters have been ordered and delivered.



*Su-27 'Flanker' taking off in evening light*



## Ukraine Air Force (Povitryani Syly Ukrayiny)

The air force consists of seven fighter regiments and three transport regiments. The former have been providing combat and reconnaissance support to ground forces as their main tasks, supplemented with air defence and maintaining air superiority within the national airspace during conflicts. Transport regiments' main tasks are tactical and strategic transport during times of conflict.

Three brigades operate the Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-29 'Fulcrum': 114 BrTA (Tactical Aviation Brigade) at Ivano/Frankivs'k, 204 BrTA at Lutsk and 40 BrTA at Vasylkiv. They all consist of two squadrons that each fly MiG-29 fighter aircraft, as well as a few Aero L-39 Albatross as squadron hack. Furthermore, there are two brigades equipped with Sukhoi Su-27 'Flankers'. These are the 39 BrTA at Ozerne-Zhytomyr and the 831 BrTA at Myrgorod. The late famous Ukrainian demonstration pilot Col. Oksanchenko flew with the latter unit. Both brigades have two squadrons of Su-27s and a few L-39s. Together these five brigades form the air defence of Ukraine.



*A duo of MiG-29s take off for an evening mission*

The airbase Mikolaev-Kulbakino on the Southern coast is shared with the naval air brigade. Their Sukhoi Su-25 'Frogfoot' ground attack aircraft have been handed over to the air force during the 90s and have been based there with the air force ever since. The two squadrons that operate them fall under the 299 BrTA. There is also a separate third squadron that flies the L-39 Albatros.

The last fighter brigade is 7 BrTA at Starokostiantyniv, or Staro as it is affectionately known, which includes three squadrons with Sukhoi Su-24 'Fencer' fighter-bombers and some L-39 Albatroses. The Fencer is unique in the Ukrainian inventory as it has swing-wings, giving it supersonic capability, and a side-by-side cockpit for its crew of two.



*One of many L-39 used as squadron hacks*

Probably also based there, is the 383 opDKLA (Separate UAV Regiment) which was the first unit in Ukraine to receive the by now rather (in)famous Turkish-built Bayraktar TB2 drones, which can be armed or used for reconnaissance. They also operate some Soviet-built Tu-141 and Tu-143 drones. These have been designed for reconnaissance, but during the recent war at least a few have been crudely converted to be used with bombs attached. One of those crashed in Croatia after it malfunctioned and flew over Romania and Hungary first. Note that some sources say this UAV unit is based at Khmel'nyts'kiy.



*Staro-based Su-24 with brake chute deployed*

Then there is the transport capacity. Two of the transport brigades are 15 OBrTrA (Transport Aviation Brigade) at Kyiv-Boryspil and 456 OBrTrA at Vinnytsia. The squadrons operate a few dozen Antonov An-24 'Coke', An-26 'Curl' and An-30 'Clank' cargo and reconnaissance aircraft, the Tupolev Tu-134 'Crusty' for people transport aircraft and multiple versions of the well-known Mil Mi-8 and Mi-9 'Hip' helicopters. The third transport brigade is the 25 OBrTrA at Melitopol, which operates the heavy transport aircraft of the Ukrainian air force. They have two squadrons that fly the Ilyushin Il-76 'Candid', and a third with the smaller An-26 'Curl'. In the past, Il-78 'Midas' tanker aircraft were used, but these have been converted to regular Il-76 transport aircraft by now.

*An-26 called "Phoenix" that returned to service after years of storage*



### **Naval Aviation Brigade (Brygada Morska Aviatsiya)**

At the end of the 20th century, the navy transferred all its MiG-29 and Su-25 fighter aircraft to the air force, keeping only patrol aircraft and helicopters. From 2004 until 2014, all naval aviation units were concentrated at Saki airbase at The Crimea. When Russia invaded there in 2014, the flying units of the naval forces retreated to Mikolaev – Kulbakino, a former naval airbase now in use by the air force, leaving behind a large number of aircraft and helicopters. Most of those were in storage or maintenance and were not ready in time to be flown away.



Four Kamov Ka-29 anti-submarine helicopters did make the move to Nikolaev, but since all their logbooks and maintenance records were left behind, these haven't flown since. However other helicopters were evacuated in time or were returned by the Russians later on.

The primary tasks of naval aviation units are maritime patrol, coastal defence, anti-submarine warfare, search and rescue and transport. The Naval Aviation Brigade consist of three squadrons.

The Naval Aviation Squadron operates all fixed wing aircraft of the naval aviation forces. These comprise two An-26 'Curl' transport aircraft which are equipped with bomb racks. Furthermore, there are three An-2 'Colts' and a couple of Be-12 'Mail' flying boats. It is noteworthy that one of the An-2s has recently been donated by a private individual in an act of patriotism, while another one has been confiscated after smuggling actions and then delivered to the navy. Also, two more An-26s were expected, but whether these have actually been delivered before the Russian invasion is currently unknown.



*Ka-27 returning after a mission*

The Naval Helicopter Squadron obviously operates the helicopters, which are a handful of Ka-27 'Helix', a single brand-new Ka-226 'Hoodlum', four Mi-14 'Haze', another four Mi-8 'Hip' and a single Mi-2 'Hoplite'. The Hips are Mi-8MTB-V versions that have been recently upgraded by Motor Sich in Zaporizhzhya. Some more older Mi-8s that had been stored for a while were also planned to be upgraded by Motor Sich, but their current status is unknown.

*Hovering Navy Mi-8 'Hip'*



The newest addition to the aviation brigade is the Naval Unmanned Squadron. This unit operates the Turkish built armed Bayraktar TB2 UAVs, of which the first were delivered in 2021.

In part 2 of this article, in the next edition of ANJ, we will be looking at Army Aviation, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, the National Guard of Ukraine, State Emergency Service, and much more.

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