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An Overview of Ukrainian Armed Forces

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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. This is the second part of a two-article series.

Upgraded Mi-8MSB-V with hovering Mi-24 in the background



Army Aviation (Armiyska Aviatsiya)

The Ukrainian army has been an active participant in peace keeping missions in former Yugoslavia in the recent past, for which many Mi-24 and Mi-26 helicopters received a white UN colour scheme which is still visible today. After the start of fighting in the Eastern part of Ukraine in 2015, a modernisation programme started to update the obsolete Mi-8T to the modern and capable Mi-8MSB-V by local company Motor Sich. This, amongst others, includes improved engines, the addition of weapon pylons and self-defence measures. More recently, just like the air force and navy, the army received the Bayraktar TB2 drones. They have been operational since 2021, however it is not known yet which unit flies them.

After the outbreak of hostilities in the Donbass region in 2014, most active helicopters were given two white stripes, painted on tail booms, to distinguish them from their Russian counterparts, as with the famous 'D-day invasion stripes' allied aircraft used in 1944. Many also lost their painted-on serial number, which was replaced with a serial on a small piece of paper behind a window. This was to make it more difficult for Russians and rebels to figure out the number of active helicopters.

The flying component of the army consists of four brigades. The 11 OBrAA (Independent Army Aviation Brigade) is based at Cherson in the South of Ukraine. This regiment also has two squadrons that operate all different versions of the Mi-8 'Hip', Mi-9 'Hip' and Mi-24 'Hind'. From the first day of the Russian invasion, heavy fighting and bombing occurred in and near the town of Cherson, which doesn't mean much good for the airbase and units based there. The airbase was taken over by the Russians, but soon thereafter, they suffered heavy losses of soldiers and equipment when they were attacked by Ukrainian forces at least three times in the week that followed. At least two dozen Russian helicopters have been destroyed or at least heavily damaged during these counter attacks. At Brody, 16 OBrAA has the same structure and helicopter types as the units at Cherson. 7 OBrAA at Novyi Kalyniv, near the Polish border, has two squadrons which also operate all versions of the Mi-8 'Hip', Mi-9 'Hip' and Mi-24 'Hind', in addition to half a dozen Mi-26 'Halo' helicopters. However, these are believed to have been withdrawn from use. Finally, there is the newest unit, 18 OBrAA at Poltava. This regiment consists of one squadron with Mi-2 'Hoplite' helicopters and another one with Mi-8 'Hips', mostly of the modernised MSB combat type. This airbase is in the North-Eastern part of Ukraine, relatively close to the troubled regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Therefore, it has been on high alert for almost a decade, since separatists aided by Russia began their fight for independence

Giant Mi-26 in storage



State Border Guard Service of Ukraine (Derzhavna Prykordonna Sluzhba Ukrayiny)

Next to the three regular armed services, Ukraine has a separate Border Guard. Although normally a separate unit, during wartime it falls under the command of the Armed Forces. Naturally, its main task is border control, including reconnaissance and transport. Next to Antonov An-24 'Coke', An-26 'Curl' and An-72/An-74 'Coaler' aircraft and Mil Mi-8 'Hip' helicopters, which are common in this region, the Border Guard acquired some Western-built Diamond Da.40 and Da.42 Guardian aircraft. These aircraft had been used by a Ukrainian flying school before but were sold to the Border Guard in around 2010. Also, the first Airbus H-125 helicopters of an order of 24 started arriving in 2020. When the war broke out, about a dozen had been delivered.

The Border Guard used to have an airbase in Crimea, but that was obviously deserted after the Russian annexation in 2014. It currently operates from Kyiv-Zhuliany, Kharkiv, Odessa and Uzhhorod.

One of the recently acquired secondhand Diamond Da.42s



National Guard of Ukraine (Nacionalna Hvardiya Ukrayiny)

Dissolved in 2000, the National Guard was reformed directly after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014. Its main tasks are maintaining public order and guarding sensitive locations like nuclear power plants. Next to these tasks, it is also tasked with counterinsurgency against so-called fifth columns and infiltrators. As such they are actively involved in the current war.

Although mainly consisting of ground units, some aircraft are used as well. A single brand new Antonov An-70 and two An-72 'Coalers' are the large transport aircraft, while a few An-26 'Curls' are also used. As with all military services, the Mil Mi-8 'Hip' is used for tactical transport, while a few upgraded Mi-2MSB 'Hoplites' have been recently delivered. Furthermore, at least five out of an order of twelve Airbus H-225 helicopters have been delivered as well. The National Guard mainly operates from Kyiv-Zhuliany, but has helicopter detachments all over the country if and when needed.



State Emergency Service (Derzhavna Sluzhba z Nadzvychaynykh Sytuatsiy)

Although not an active military unit, this government branch is included in this overview as its aircraft and helicopters have been quite busy since the outbreak of the war, flying people out of the country and probably bringing supplies back. The main task of the Emergency Service is civil defence (including disaster prevention, rescue missions, firefighting and such), which is shown in their motto "To prevent. To rescue. To help."

Its main operating base is Nhyzin near Kiev, with small detachments at Kyiv-Zhuliany, Kharkiv and Uzhhorod. Its equipment consists of four Antonov An-32 'Clank' firefighter aircraft, the usual An-26 'Curls' and Mi-8T 'Hips', as well as more modern Western-built Eurocopter EC.145 (two) and Airbus H-225 (nine) helicopters.

Mi-24 with its deadly cannon and eagle eyes



Current conflict and future

During the war, many transport aircraft and helicopters have been flying back and forth to neighbouring countries, transporting people out of the country, and supplies back into Ukraine. Fighter aircraft are doing their job as well, defending their airspace against hostile aircraft while supporting ground troops. In the run up to the actual outbreak of war, Turkey delivered multiple armed Bayraktar TB2 drones. Actually, two Turkish A.400 transport aircraft became stuck at Kyiv-Borispol aircraft on the day of the Russian invasion and were still there a month later. Furthermore, the European Union intended to deliver additional fighter aircraft of types that are already in use in Ukraine (MiG-29 and Su-25). This plan was quickly abolished as the countries that were supposed to deliver them (Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia) couldn't do so for various reasons.

Almost every airbase of the Ukrainian Forces has been under heavy attack by the Russians, with the amount of damage to infrastructure and aircraft currently unclear. Furthermore, many aircraft and helicopters have been lost while fighting the Russian invaders and it is still much too early to make up the balance. However, apart from the loss of equipment, the loss of lives is obviously considerably worse. One of these is well-known former Su-27 Flanker display pilot Col. Oksanchenko, who flew at airshows all over Europe. He retired in 2018, but voluntarily returned to active duty after the Russian invasion to defend his country. He was killed in action during the second week of the war. His attitude is an example of the fighting spirit of the Ukrainian people. Hopefully his sacrifice and that of so many others won't be in vain.

The Ghost of Kyiv

In wartime, heroes stand up and legends are born. True or not, stories of these inspire people and help them to stay strong in times of need. The 'Ghost of Kyiv' is a Ukrainian fighter pilot flying a MiG-29 'Fulcrum'. He is said to have downed no less than six Russian aircraft on the first day of the invasion. These should include three Su-27/Su-35 'Flankers', two Su-25 'Frogfoots' and a single MiG-29. If true, this has made him an 'ace' in one day, as a pilot who has at least five aerial victories over enemy aircraft is called. This hasn't happened in Europe since World War II. Either way, real or not, for the Ukrainian people he surely is the reminder that there is still hope in this world of war while they fight for their country!

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