



Ukrainian special forces exit truck before UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter flight during exercise Combined Resolve 14 at Hohenfels, Germany, September 24, 2020 (U.S. Army/Patrik Orcutt)

A Primer on Ukrainian Special Forces

Beyond Joint

By Kevin D. Stringer and Taisiia Vivdych

Special operations forces (SOF) are significant contributors to joint warfighting. In Ukraine,

this truism is on display through headlines like “Ukraine’s Special Operations Forces Destroy Russian Buk-M3

Colonel Kevin D. Stringer, USA (Ret.), Ph.D., is a Lecturer at the University of Northwestern Switzerland and affiliated Associate Professor at the General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania. Taisiia Vivdych is a Ukrainian journalist with a BSc from the War Studies University in Warsaw, Poland. She participated in an Erasmus exchange at the Military Academy of Lithuania in 2024.

Surface-to-Air Missile System Worth US\$45 Million” and “Ukraine’s Special Operations Forces Kill 21 and Injure 40 North Korean Soldiers in Fierce Battle in Russia’s Kursk Oblast.”¹ Yet the literature on Ukrainian SOF in the West is minimal, and a greater understanding of their different formations and characteristics might yield insights

for enhanced SOF security force assistance (SFA) approaches toward Ukraine as well as offer examples of unique types of Ukrainian special forces units for potential application within Western SOF force structures.

In the United States, SOF are joint military formations under the overall combatant command of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) within the U.S. Department of War.² In contrast, in Ukraine, SOF, as defined from a Ukrainian perspective, are beyond joint and dispersed across the Ukrainian interministerial landscape, including the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, intelligence services, law enforcement agencies, and security organizations. This distribution makes coordination and integration more complex and contrasts with the centralized SOF command typically found in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries. This difference, and the resulting misperceptions from Western policymakers due to potential mirror-imaging, has implications for SOF SFA provision for Ukraine, while simultaneously offering opportunities for Ukraine with partner assistance to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of its entire interagency special forces portfolio.

While the bulk of the existing literature and reporting on Ukrainian SOF has focused on the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces Command (USOFCOM) under the General Staff of Armed Forces of Ukraine,³ most accounts ignore the other special forces in the Ukrainian universe or conflate them with USOFCOM.⁴ This mixing or oversight illustrates the pitfalls when Western scholars and practitioners apply a NATO or U.S. SOF organizational template to a country with a different SOF tradition and culture. Hence, a more nuanced understanding of the Ukrainian special forces landscape by U.S. and coalition partners could lead to better collaboration and outcomes with the various Ukrainian special forces formations in supporting their war against Russia.

This primer aims to provide an understanding of the development and current state of Ukrainian SOF, beginning

with their historical Soviet *spetsnaz* (that is, special purpose) heritage, followed by their subsequent evolution after Ukrainian independence in 1991. It describes the current ecosphere of Ukrainian special forces units across governmental ministries, including their contribution to Ukrainian national security. It then provides a glimpse of wartime Ukrainian special operations and missions in the current context of the full-scale Russian invasion. While not fully comprehensive given often limited and incomplete open-source information on the germane organizations, the overview offers broad insights into the main Ukrainian special forces formations based on the authors' access to Ukrainian-language sources and SOF personnel as well as a coauthor's SOF expertise. The conclusion provides recommendations for NATO SOF SFA endeavors to Ukraine as well as thoughts for the construction of SOF formations from nonstandard recruitment pools. Foremost, Western SOF partners should acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of Ukrainian SOF and coordinate and align SOF SFA efforts with the whole of the Ukrainian SOF universe in mind. Second, the creation of units like the Kraken Regiment, a volunteer special operations unit established in 2022, should be evaluated by U.S. and allied militaries for future SOF force structure considerations.

Ukrainian Special Forces: The Soviet Legacy

As a former Soviet republic, Ukraine derives its SOF legacy from the Cold War *spetsnaz* units that emerged from the Soviet experiences of World War II. In that conflict, the Soviet Union created partisan groups to fight against German occupiers. These groups conducted sabotage missions, gathered intelligence, and organized resistance behind enemy lines.⁵ With the advent of the Cold War, the Soviet Union formalized this concept. On October 1950, Minister of Defense Aleksandr Vasilievsky, with the concurrence of Chief of the General Staff General Sergei Shtemenko and General Matvei Zakharov, the head of the General Staff of the

Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the Soviet Union, signed a directive ordering the creation of special reconnaissance units, *spetsnaz*, which were controlled by the GRU.⁶ This authorization marked the official establishment of Soviet *spetsnaz*, which soon became an important element of the country's overall military strategy. Catalyzed by the introduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons into Europe, *spetsnaz* units, which were called "separate brigades of special designation," trained for reconnaissance and sabotage operations deep in enemy territory. These self-sufficient brigades could operate independently. Their structure included reconnaissance battalions, special designation companies, and support units.⁷ According to author Tor Bukkvoll, "Their mission remained the destruction of U.S. nuclear weapons throughout the Cold War."⁸ These were the special forces adversaries to their Cold War NATO counterparts such as Great Britain's Special Air Service, U.S. Army Special Forces, Belgium's *Eléments Spéciaux de Recherche*, and others.

The name *spetsnaz* comes from the Russian term *spetsialnoe naznachenie* for "special designation" or "special purpose," and unlike Western SOF equivalents that emphasize the specialness of the operator, the *spetsnaz* designation reflects the unique roles assigned to these troops.⁹ In fact, contrary to the NATO SOF concept, it was the unique skills and higher-end capabilities, rather than the mission set, that determined whether a particular unit was included in the Soviet special-purpose forces community.¹⁰ As Lester Grau and Chuck Bartles explain:

The word "special" [in spetsnaz] is used in a very broad way that can indicate that the unit has a very narrow area of specialization, such as signals intelligence, engineering, reconnaissance, etc.; or the unit is experimental or temporary in nature; or the unit conducts tasks of special importance such as sensitive political or clandestine operations. This broad usage of the term means that "spetsnaz" cannot be thought of as [directly] equating to the Western concept of [SOF].¹¹

An important feature of Soviet spetsnaz was its decentralized existence in the bureaucracy, which reflected a type of political warlordism as different military directorates, intelligence services, and security agencies competed for power and prestige within the communist system by establishing such organizations.¹² Spetsnaz units under the GRU, Committee for State Security (KGB), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and border troops had different missions and responsibilities. For example, while GRU spetsnaz focused on large-scale operations behind enemy lines, KGB spetsnaz, especially “Vypmel,” specialized in secret missions abroad, with MVD and border spetsnaz providing security inside the country.¹³

This genetic pattern continues in the Russian Federation today, where there is greater diversity among spetsnaz units than within the Western SOF community. Unlike in the United States and most NATO countries, where special operations units are generally limited to departments of war/defense, in Russia they proliferate into the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Federal Security Service, Federal Protection Service, Federal Penal Service, and other divisions concerned with intelligence collection and diplomatic security.¹⁴ Equally, when the Soviet Union collapsed, some of the spetsnaz formations were absorbed by the successor states, and although the units evolved, the spetsnaz legacy remained strong in the cultural DNA of successor-state SOF, including a dispersion of special forces units across the national interagency landscape. Ukraine was no exception to this inheritance.

Ukrainian Special Forces: Post-Independence

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, independent Ukraine inherited four GRU spetsnaz brigades, and these units remained subordinated to the new Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) of the Ukrainian General Staff within the Ministry of Defence.¹⁵ The current SOF of the armed forces descend from this lineage. There was also a KGB unit that evolved

into the State Security Service of Ukraine (SBU)’s Special Operations Center Alfa (SOCA).¹⁶ Finally, there existed an array of Interior Ministry special purpose troops that ultimately the National Guard of Ukraine, established in 2015, amalgamated and acquired.¹⁷ This heritage has produced a heterogeneous mix of SOF formations, elite forces, and special weapons and tactics groups in the current Ukrainian context.

In the early years, Ukrainian special units continued to follow Soviet procedures because of limited resources and capabilities. However, with the introduction of international norms and standards within the Ukrainian security sector, a significant transformation began. With U.S. assistance, Ukraine undertook efforts to modernize its military SOF in the early 2000s, but by 2009 the project was halted because of a lack of Ukrainian political support. As early as 2008, the General Staff and Ministry of Defence had attempted to develop a consolidated and independent SOF service within the Ukrainian armed forces, but the government rejected this initiative. From 2008 to 2015, a special operations directorate operated within the General Staff as a coordination and advising element, with special forces dispersed across different military services and branches of the Ukrainian armed forces and mostly misused as “elite” infantry.¹⁸

Catalyzed by the Russian occupation of the Crimea and the invasion of Donbas in 2014, Ukrainian political leadership initiated several reforms for the rapid modernization and improvement of SOF, including a streamlining of the command structure of Ukrainian special units. For the military SOF, the first public announcement occurred on June 18, 2014.¹⁹ In 2015, the General Staff and Ministry of Defence developed and signed a concept for the formation and development of the SOF and simultaneously established USOFCON.²⁰ Later in 2015, a presidential decree finalized the creation of the Special Operations Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (SOF AFU), with complete operational, administrative, and logistical responsibilities.²¹

Subsequently, in 2016, an amendment to the law of Ukraine defined a special operation as

*a set of coordinated and interrelated in purpose, task, place and time, special actions of units of the [SOF AFU], aimed at creating conditions for achieving strategic (operational) goals, which are carried out according to a single plan independently or in cooperation with other units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, law enforcement agencies of Ukraine, and other components of the defense forces.*²²

Finally, in July 2016, President Petro Poroshenko signed Law 4795 officially establishing the SOF AFU as a separate and fully independent service, with the appropriate consolidation of existing military special forces units and delineating its main tasks as countering terrorism, ensuring security at strategic sites, and performing special missions in the conflict zone in Donbas.²³

Yet as a SOF scholar-practitioner noted, “Two enduring institution-specific challenges remained during this period: the dispersion of SOF capabilities and responsibilities across several military, intelligence, and internal security organizations, and the cultural residue of the spetsnaz legacy.”²⁴ Indeed, the consolidating 2016 law did not include the following special operations units found in other governmental organizations:

- SOCA of the SBU
- 10th Separate Operational Response Unit (DOZOR) of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine
- Rapid Response Corps (KORD) of the National Police of Ukraine
- the opaque special operations elements within the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine (SZR).

The next section overviews this diverse SOF landscape, including the consolidated Ministry of Defence formations under the Special Operations Command of the Ukrainian Armed Forces as well as the separate Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate formations, highlighting the Kraken Regiment as an example. Although the National



President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanks Security Service of Ukraine warriors for Operation *Spiderweb* and presents them with state awards, June 4, 2025 (Courtesy President of Ukraine)

Guard of Ukraine, established in 2015, has a multitude of special purpose units inherited from the amalgamation and acquisition of various Interior Ministry units, they will not be covered for reasons of scope.²⁵

Ukrainian Special Forces Ecosphere

State Security Service of Ukraine's Special Operations Center Alfa. The officer-only SBU SOCA is one of the most important components in Ukraine's counterterrorism and special operations system.²⁶ In June 1994, President of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk by decree No. 335/94 created this formation, and it became the successor

to the Soviet KGB special services. Its main tasks were to combat terrorism, ensure security, and coordinate special operations. Over time, the unit has undergone significant changes to effectively respond to contemporary threats and challenges, necessitating ongoing improvements to its structure and functions. In July 1996, SBU Directorate A was renamed the SBU Department for Combating Terrorism and Protection of Participants in Criminal Proceedings and Law Enforcement Officers.²⁷ In July 1998, the directorate was reorganized into the Counter-Terrorism Directorate, expanding its powers and functions. The structure of the renamed Special Operations Center A includes

several key components, each performing specialized tasks. Operational groups specialize in counterterrorism operations, hostage rescue, and assault actions. Additionally, SOCA ensures the safety of participants in criminal proceedings, including witnesses and other court process participants. Most of the operators have combat experience in the antiterrorist operations in Eastern Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Iraq.²⁸

SOCA intelligence units focus on collecting and analyzing critical information necessary for planning and executing special operations as well as utilizing technical means, an intelligence network, and operational developments. The technical units provide the

necessary equipment and logistical support, including modern communication devices, combat gear, and bespoke equipment, for carrying out special missions. SOCA has been involved in many significant operations. In 2014, at the onset of the war in Donbas, the unit conducted operations to neutralize terrorist threats and rescue hostages. On December 9, 2015, in Kyiv, SOCA conducted an operation to eliminate a “Russian sabotage-reconnaissance group.” Since 2022, the unit has been actively engaged in combat operations. SOCA operatives defended Kharkiv and participated in the liberation of Kupiansk during the Kharkiv counteroffensive. During liberation operations to reclaim Ukrainian territories, SOCA conducted reconnaissance, adjusted artillery fire on enemy targets, and engaged the enemy using mortars, antitank weapons, and sniper fire. In 2022, the unit also participated in assault operations in populated areas, supporting Ukrainian forces in their fight to liberate occupied territories. Today, SOCA remains a vital part of Ukraine’s security system. Its responsibilities encompass not only the original counterterrorism role but also specialized combat operations against and within Russia.

KORD. Established in 2016, the Rapid Response Corps is the special operations unit of the National Police of Ukraine.²⁹ At its inception, the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Volodymyr Groysman, emphasized that the creation of this special force unit was part of an integral reform of the law enforcement system, designed to provide effective response to all contemporary criminal challenges, with a special emphasis on organized crime.³⁰ KORD’s main task is to conduct police special operations against organized crime, gangs, heavily armed criminals, and any perpetrators that threaten the use of armed force. This role also includes hostage situations, personal protection, and specified counterterrorist actions.

In contrast to seemingly similar U.S. law enforcement special weapons and tactics units, KORD, in cooperation with the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the

National Guard of Ukraine, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, and the State Security Service of Ukraine, has the mission to contribute to the territorial defense of Ukraine, repel armed aggression against Ukrainian sovereignty, fight against sabotage and reconnaissance forces of aggressor paramilitary or armed formations, and ensure public order during emergencies or wartime conditions.³¹ KORD has two main types of units: Type A (assault) and Type B (support). Assault units conduct operations in high-risk criminal situations, including counterterrorism, and participate in specialized combat operations. For example, from the first days of the 2022 full-scale invasion, KORD participated in combat missions in Kharkiv, Donetsk region, Kyiv region, Kherson region, and Zaporizhzhia.³² In 2024, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, KORD operatives conducted 25 special police operations and took part in almost 1,700 special actions.³³

DOZOR. The 10th Separate Operational Response Unit is a SOF unit within the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine.³⁴ Established in 2014, its primary mission is to address the most complex challenges related to Ukrainian border security. DOZOR operates in regions with high levels of illicit activity such as illegal migration, arms smuggling, and potential cross-border terrorist threats. To ensure effective operations, the unit is strategically located in cities such as Kharkiv, Zhytomyr, Lviv, Kherson, and Odesa, allowing for rapid responses to emerging threats. The DOZOR mandate includes providing security for high-profile individuals such as the President of Ukraine and other senior officials; engaging in counterterrorism activities; and combating illegal migration, human trafficking, and drug trafficking. The unit also participates in special operations and surveillance missions to gather intelligence and assess threats. Participation in countersabotage activities and combat operational tasks is an integral part of the unit’s work, underscoring its significance in ensuring national security and the integrity of Ukraine’s borders.

The structure of DOZOR comprises a headquarters responsible for strategic planning and overall leadership, with an information protection service that ensures the confidentiality of sensitive data and operational security. Additionally, DOZOR includes specialized departments, such as its canine unit, which assists in detecting contraband and tracking suspects, and the special equipment unit, which handles the maintenance and application of modern technological resources. Through its specialized training and rapid response capabilities, DOZOR contributes to the overall effectiveness of Ukraine’s border protection efforts, enhancing the country’s ability to respond to various security challenges to its sovereignty.

SZR, Operational Intelligence Units. The Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine, established in 2004, is an essential component of Ukraine’s national security system. Its primary task is to provide the state with intelligence information about threats from outside the country. The SZR closely collaborates with other intelligence agencies, such as the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate and national intelligence. The existence of special operations units within the SZR is opaque, with no direct open-source references, but indirect sources point to their existence. For example, the SZR structure refers to operational intelligence units carrying out special tasks and operations, including monitoring terrorist threats, economic espionage, and military activities. Official resources note that the SZR participates in activities to gather information on terrorist threats as well as counterintelligence measures to neutralize espionage networks. A law titled “On the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine” defines the structure of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine to include human intelligence units, special technical units, and internal security units.³⁵ Finally, the official SZR website mentions that the leadership of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine accentuates the work of its Foreign Countermeasures Department, mainly countering terrorism, international organized crime



Ukraine special operations forces members assigned to 3rd Regiment prepare to conduct fast rope insertion and extraction system training with U.S. Air Force CV-22 Osprey during exercise Fiction Urchin near Yavoriv, Ukraine, September 19, 2020 (U.S. Air Force/Mackenzie Mendez)

activity, illegal drugs smuggling, illegal ammunition trade, and illegal migration, all tasks that imply a special operations capability or unit.³⁶ Consequently, given the spetsnaz legacy within the Ukrainian intelligence community, there is a high likelihood that SZR, as a Soviet legacy intelligence agency, possesses its own SOF elements.

Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate, Kraken Regiment. The GUR acts as the overarching authority for all military intelligence assets within the Armed Forces of Ukraine.³⁷ Founded in 1994, the GUR began

establishing SOF within its organization at its inception. Within the GUR, the 4th Special Intelligence Service controls the multitude of Ukrainian special operations intelligence units. Moreover, the GUR maintains operational oversight for certain special forces units that are organic to the Ukrainian Armed Forces and National Guard.³⁸ For illustrative purposes, this section spotlights the Kraken Regiment, a volunteer special operations unit established in 2022.

Created in the early days of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, this originally conventional unit quickly

became one of the most powerful and effective elements of the Ukrainian defense. From the start of the war, Kraken has been actively involved in fighting Russian troops, especially in northeastern Ukraine. One of its first serious battles took place on February 27, 2024, when Kraken fought against the 2nd Guards Spetsnaz Brigade (GRU). This operation to repel Russian special forces was one of the unit's early major victories, and Kraken showed a high level of organization and combat readiness, effectively using modern communication tools like Starlink to coordinate battlefield

Ukrainian special operations forces and U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers assigned to 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) move across objective during exercise Combined Resolve XI at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, December 10, 2018 (U.S. Army/Benjamin Haulenbeek)



effects. Later, Kraken distinguished itself by liberating Vilkhivka, a village east of Kharkiv. The successful assault on Vilkhivka by the Kraken volunteers—Azov veterans, patriots, football fans, information technology specialists, civil servants, and Anti-Terrorist Operation zone (Donbas) veterans impressed the GUR, which decided to create a new special operations unit based on those volunteers who demonstrated prowess in the defense of Kharkiv and the Vilkhivka liberation.³⁹

Although converting a volunteer conventional combat organization into a special forces unit under the auspices of a military intelligence directorate is not a typical Western approach, this transformation demonstrates the need for a better understanding of the Ukrainian national security culture's approach to special forces and evaluating these unconventional organizations for possible adaptation into the NATO SOF force structure. Conceptually, Kraken can be considered as an elite partisan unit, Ranger-like in some respects, but not SOF in the U.S. or NATO sense.⁴⁰ Architecturally, Kraken is composed of assault groups, reconnaissance sections, and support units. The unit's fighters have high levels of training and specialization, allowing them to perform complex and dangerous tasks to include a wide range of special operations, counterterrorism actions, critical infrastructure protection, and special reconnaissance missions. The unit actively interacts with other Ukrainian security forces, including the armed forces and rapid response departments.

Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, USOFCOM. As noted, the USOFCOM was established in 2015 to consolidate several army and naval special operations regiments and two training centers. With an unconfirmed strength of approximately 2,000 to 4,000 members, USOFCOM has been the face of Ukrainian SOF to the West, and since its inception, USOFCOM has emphasized its development as a Western force with equipment and practices aligned with NATO SOF tactics, techniques, and procedures.⁴¹ Consisting of land,

maritime, and air elements, USOFCOM is a joint force that conducts all the primary NATO SOF missions—military assistance, special reconnaissance, direct action, and psychological operations.

Current Operations and Command Structure

All Ukrainian special forces units, military and otherwise, discussed in this article have been involved in combat operations since February 2022. They have conducted a wide array of operations ranging from special reconnaissance for precision strikes on high-value targets in Russia to unconventional warfare activities in conjunction with partisan forces in the occupied territories. They have also been misused as assault troops by conventional force commanders in various offensive and defensive actions. Although source material for many classified operations is difficult to find, the August 2024 Kursk offensive showcased Ukrainian SOF's conduct of more traditional missions, where small units operated behind enemy lines to sabotage critical infrastructure such as railways, fuel depots, and communication lines, while attacking installations and troop concentrations deep within Russian territory.⁴² For command and control purposes, while USOFCOM has unity of command over the military's joint special operations forces, the other formations fall outside of its remit. According to a senior Lithuanian officer and advisor with extensive Ukrainian SOF interactions, "This is an old problem with the [Ukrainian] culture of jointness and interministerial cooperation, which doesn't really exist, but was tried unsuccessfully before the war. Coordination only happens when [special forces] commanders meet because the management culture is hierarchical."⁴³

Conclusions

The varied nature and dispersed governmental placement of Ukrainian special forces raises themes concerning U.S. and NATO SOF SFA effectively reaching the totality of these formations. Equally, do U.S. and NATO

SOF organizations fully understand the complete universe of Ukrainian special forces? For the first point on SFA, there exists a murkiness in evaluating what formations should be included under the Ukrainian SOF aegis. For example, Ukrainian law enforcement services are heavily armed, with military-like structures and equal military ranks, and are equipped similarly to light infantry soldiers. Thus, some units could be recognized as the equivalent of NATO states' armed forces SOF units, while others are nothing more than their parent organization's elite force or local police special weapons and tactics teams.⁴⁴ The division of Ukrainian special forces across multiple agencies automatically creates a siloing effect on the U.S. side, with different agencies taking responsibility for the institutional relationships based on national government mirror-imaging.

For illustration, the United States possesses specialized law enforcement units in the U.S. Border Patrol, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation that mirror and match their respective Ukrainian counterparts for SFA. In fact, earlier training programs for the Ministry of Internal Affairs special forces units—DOZOR and KORD—were implemented with the assistance of experts from DEA's Foreign-Deployed Advisory and Support Teams and the U.S. Border Patrol's special operations Border Patrol Tactical Unit.⁴⁵ The limitations with this approach are that U.S. law enforcement special operations units are not foreseen for participation in the large-scale combat operations that confront all Ukrainian special units, and SFA delivered by these organizations would need to be well coordinated with USSOCOM and allied SOF military commands to avoid duplication or inefficiencies in efforts. In large-scale combat operations, for example, the State Security Service's SOCA, originally a classical SOF counterterrorism unit, has been forced to adapt its tactics, techniques, and procedures to incorporate deep operations and the use of towed artillery to deal with the current wartime environment.⁴⁶

Current literature suggests that NATO and U.S. special operations institution-building and force assistance measures have been primarily directed at USOFCOM, which strongly reflects the U.S. arrangement for joint SOF. Given that Ukrainian special forces are unlike U.S. and most NATO special forces—and distributed across the armed forces, intelligence services, law enforcement agencies, and other governmental organizations—an initial recommendation is to centralize the SFA approach and have U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, the responsible joint theater headquarters for Ukraine, or NATO Allied Special Operations Forces Command assess the entire Ukrainian special forces ecosphere for a greater understanding of capabilities and competencies with the goal of improving and coordinating a unity of effort in SFA activities to these formations. This step would ensure that allied SOF training, equipment, and capacity building brings targeted value across the entire Ukrainian SOF landscape.

Additionally, there is a significant cultural difference in how Ukraine defines its special forces compared to its U.S. and NATO counterparts. The success of Kraken and similar units suggests that the Ukrainian SOF combat experience may hold lessons for U.S. and allied militaries. A deeper organizational analysis could address the question of whether SOF formations like Kraken are generalizable to the United States and other states for both SOF recruitment and force generation.

Overall, the Ukrainian SOF arrangement, based on its unique military culture legacy, creates risks for its partners in applying well-meaning security force assistance since there can be a tendency to mirror-image the Western template onto Ukraine and therefore miss opportunities. Despite organizational and cultural differences, cooperation between Ukrainian special forces and NATO special forces is extremely important given the current war. A greater understanding of Ukrainian SOF will enhance NATO and U.S. support to improve the overall capability and readiness of all Ukrainian special forces. JFQ

Notes

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¹⁰ Michael Strzelecki, “The ‘Polite People’—The History Unknown,” unpublished manuscript, July 2024.

¹¹ Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*, 279.

¹² Galeotti, *Spetsnaz*, 4–6, 43.

¹³ See, for example, the controversial source Viktor Suvorov, *Spetsnaz: The Inside Story of the Soviet Special Forces* (New York: Norton, 1987), 4–9.

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¹⁷ Lavrov, “Ukrainian Special Operations Forces,” 35–53.

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¹⁹ Biletskyi, “Today’s Ukrainian Special Operations Forces.”

²⁰ Biletskyi, “Today’s Ukrainian Special Operations Forces.”

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²⁴ Stringer, “Special Operations Forces Institution-Building From Strategic Approach to Security Force Assistance.”

²⁵ Lavrov, “Ukrainian Special Operations Forces,” 35–53.

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²⁷ IAVCTSP, *Journal Alpha*.

²⁸ IAVCTSP, *Journal Alpha*.

²⁹ This section derives from documents published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine: “On Approval of the Regulation on Special Purpose Police Units, Order No. 987,” April 4, 2017, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z1565-17#Text>; “On the Approval of the Regulation on Special Police Units ‘Rapid Action Corps,’ Order No. 958,” November 26, 2018, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z1436-18#Text>; “Behind the Scenes of the Ministry of Internal Affairs’: How the Special Unit ‘CORD’ Works,” April 29, 2024, <https://mvs.gov.ua/en/news/za-lastunkami-mvs-iak-praciuye-specpidrozdil-kord>; “Oleksandr Turchynov: The Newly Created Special Purpose Squad ‘KORD’ Will Set High Standards for the Whole National Police,” National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, 2016, <https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/en/Dialnist/2484.html?PRINT>.

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³³ “Behind the Scenes of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.”

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³⁵ Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine, n.d., <https://szru.gov.ua>.

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³⁷ This section derives from “VSE PRO HUR MO (Holovne upravlinnya rozvidky Ministerstva oborony Ukrayiny)” [All about GUR MO (Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine)], video, 18:41, May 6, 2023, <https://youtu.be/OrzGvv5GHI>; “‘Kraken’ atakuye. Istoriya spetspidrozdilu HUR MO, yakyy demonizuyut’ rosiyany” [“Kraken” attacks: The story of the defense intelligence unit that the Russians have demonized], *Ukrainska Pravda* 25, March 12, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2023/03/7/7392249/>; “Kraken: Secret Operations, Budanov’s Courage, the Fugitive Yaroslavskyi,” video, 1:07:09, March 25, 2023, <https://youtu.be/Ju3GtMyAzE0>; Anzhelika Baibak, “Pidrozdil Kraken pochav formuvatsiya za 1,5 tyzhnya do 24 lyutoho: Budanov rozkryv nevidomi detali” [The Kraken unit began to form 1.5 weeks before February 24: Budanov revealed unknown details], October 21, 2023, https://24tv.ua/kraken-spetspidrozdil-budanov-rozpoviv-detali-pro-stvorennia_n2416304.

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⁴⁴ Analysis derived from Strzelecki, “The ‘Polite People.’”

⁴⁵ “Arsen Avakov.”

⁴⁶ Interview by author of SOCA lieutenant colonel, Oberammergau, Germany, June 19, 2024.