

Policy Brief

July 2020

Dangerous Trends in the Black Sea Region

(II quarter 2020)¹

1. General assessment of the security situation in the Black Sea region

In the second quarter of 2020, the security situation in the Black Sea region remained unstable, with a tendency to further deterioration that may worsen significantly at the beginning of autumn this year, when Russia holds the strategic military exercises "Caucasus 2020".

Russia is a generator of tension in the region. It is increasingly demonstrating its military dominance in the Azov - Black Sea area and has entered a new phase of confrontation with Turkey in Libya. The devastating defeats inflicted on Russian troops in Syria and Libya by Turkish forces with the use of modern technologies of warfare and combat UAV have additionally caused aggressiveness of the Putin regime. The Kremlin has developed an ultimately unbridled desire of the limited use of nuclear weapons to demonstrate Russia's power and strength against the backdrop of economic failures, public discontent, and political turbulences inside the country. The military show-parade on June 24 reaffirmed the Kremlin's thirst for war.

The "Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Restraint", signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin on June 2, 2020, neglect the threshold for nuclear weapon use and demonstrate the Kremlin's readiness to escalate international tensions. This aims to force Europe to abandon the U.S. nuclear umbrella and create an additional intimidation effect for countries, including Ukraine and Georgia, which look for NATO membership or/and a security umbrella from the United States. Russia disguises its aggressive actions with propaganda theses about movement of NATO infrastructure closer to Russia's borders, and sends a message to Central and Eastern European countries that they are the primary targets for the Russian nuclear weapons, including tactical ones. The Kremlin expects a restricted response from the United States and NATO, which will not have fatal consequences for Russia. As a test of such a reaction, Russia could resort to a demonstration tactical nuclear strike along a route of Turkish troops somewhere in the Libyan Desert. However, Russia is focusing on subversive activities against the West from within the EU and NATO member states, as it was evidenced by the active participation of various pro-Russian left organizations in the protests in the United States.

The domestic situation in Russia is steadily deteriorating. Decrease of Russians' income level, fall of oil prices, the unpopular pension reform, ineffective government actions to combat the coronavirus pandemic, incomprehensible to the majority of the population constitutional changes, restrictions on the rights of federations, discrimination against national minority and indigenous languages, and the burden of military adventures of the Kremlin sharply lower the rating of the regime and Putin personally. In this situation, the Kremlin is stepping up its rhetoric about external enemies - the United States, NATO, Poland, the Baltic States, Georgia, Ukraine and even Belarus. It is obvious that Russia seeks war and prepares for the expansion of its armed aggression against Ukraine, annexation of Belarus, final de-Europeanization and total dependence of Moldova, separation of northern regions of Kazakhstan, and invasion of the Baltics.

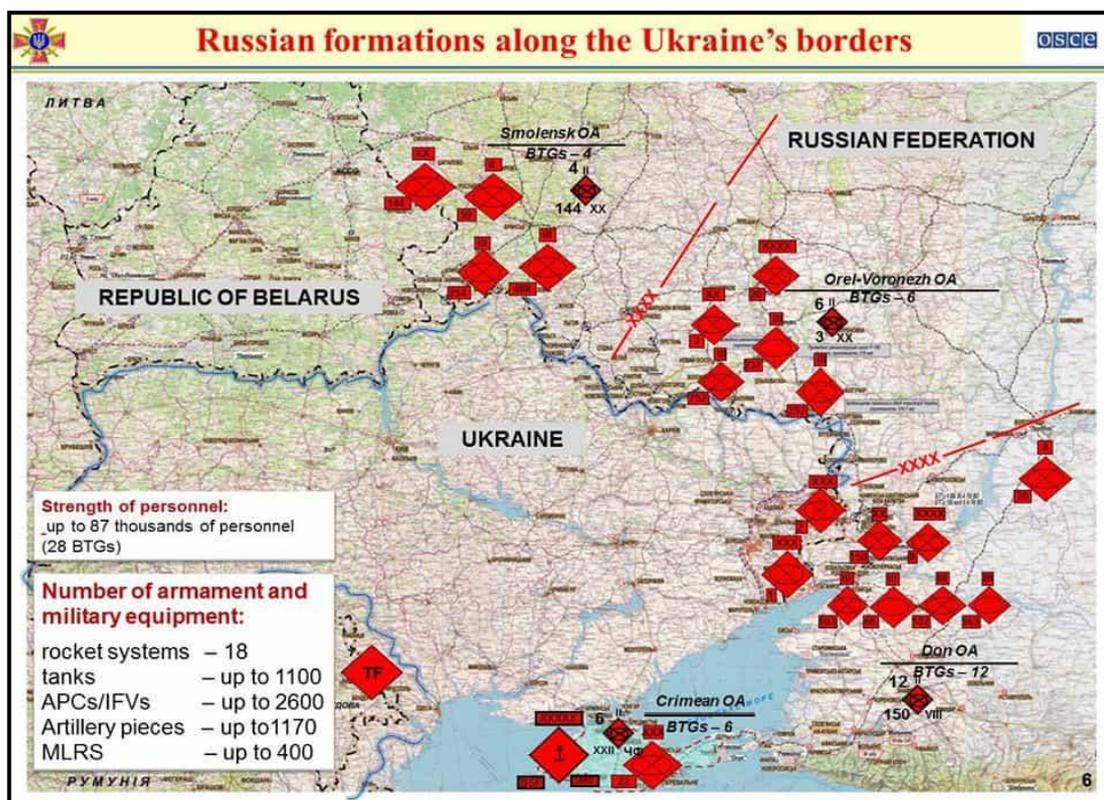
¹ The paper was prepared in the framework of the project "Promoting Security in the Black Sea Region through Greater Involvement of Non-Governmental Players" with the support of the Black Sea Trust Fund, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Black Sea Trust Fund or its partners.

2. Challenges, threats, and signs of deteriorating of the security situation in the region

Military-political domain

The most likely scenario of the domestic political situation in Russia is a combination of further economic decline and decrease of living standards, which will increase the discontent and protest potential of the population and frustrate the elite with inability of the central power to effectively address actual problems while defending the ruling class's interests. These factors weaken the regime that is likely to lead to a surge of its aggressiveness this autumn. Therefore, Vladimir Putin will seek to demonstrate to the elite that he is capable to solve serious foreign policy problems, keep harsh behavior towards neighboring countries and, most importantly, the West, and unite the nation in the face of "external threats", even through internal repressions. The Kremlin expects that the combat capabilities of the Russian armed forces have not yet declined in the result of the pandemic, and the West is mainly focused on its own problems caused by the Covid-19 outbreak.

The Russian military pressure on Ukraine can be expected to increase, including the use or a real threat of the use of force. Based on data of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, it can be concluded that Russia has deployed three military groups along the borders with Ukraine and Belarus, which are able to carry out aggression in the shortest possible time.



Source: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-world/3055672-1100-rosijskih-tankiv-i-330-bojovih-litaktiv-uzdovz-kordonu-z-ukrainou.html>

One of the scenarios is an invasion of Russian troops in the south of Ukraine - in Kherson and Mykolayiv regions in late summer or early autumn under the pretext of a need to provide water to the population of Crimea. Another scenario envisages armed provocations in eastern Ukraine, which could escalate into operations to occupy the entire territory of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Both scenarios are also aimed at full subordination of official Kyiv to the Kremlin's decision.

Another target of Russian aggression is Belarus, which is strategically important in the wider Baltic region. In the case of a conventional armed conflict between Russia and NATO and movement of Russian troops to the Suwalki Corridor, the participation of the Belarusian army in this conflict would significantly affect its results. President Lukashenko's fierce resistance to the Kremlin's demands for "reunification" of Belarus with Russia and the loss of a possibility of oil pressure on Minsk are pushing Moscow to use force, including possible annexation of Belarus.

Russia's actions to annex South Ossetia and Abkhazia, attempts to annex northern Kazakhstan and launch a new war against Georgia are also possible. The main motive for the Kremlin in each of these cases may be to demonstrate Putin's resoluteness and political potential to the Russian

population and elites.

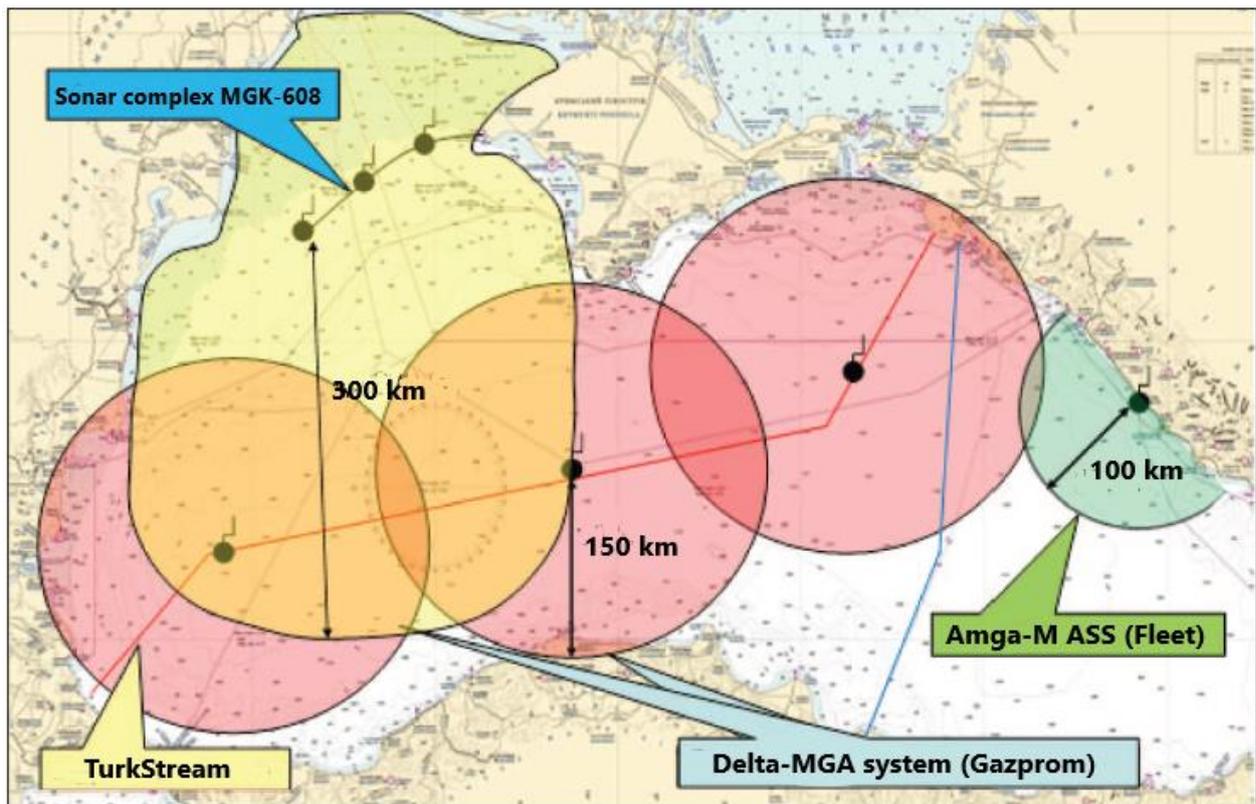
Military dimension

The period from late summer to early autumn 2020 is marked in the Russian military calendar by unprecedented large-scale exercises "Caucasus 2020" of the Southern Military District, maneuvers of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the occupation forces in Crimea, which may precede a large-scale invasion of southern Ukraine. This is confirmed by the almost uninterrupted tactical exercises of the Russian troops, training of some elements of the blockade of the Ukrainian coast with the infliction of strikes and landing of naval and airborne troops. The purpose of a possible invasion - to provide occupied Crimea with Dnipro water from the North Crimean Canal, should stimulate a new wave of patriotism in Russia, according to the Kremlin's logic.

To strengthen the Russian Black Sea Fleet, in 2020, it is planned to form 20 crews for new ships, which are to be constructed. By the end of the year, 16 warships and support vessels are expected to arrive to the Fleet. The fleet aviation continues to practically familiarize helicopters like Ka-27M, Ka-27TB and Ka-31R. It can be stated that currently the Black Sea Fleet has enough forces and means to threaten Ukraine and Georgia from the sea.

In Crimea, Russia has created a self-sufficient military formation, numbering more than 32.5 thousand soldiers, equipped the fleet with Caliber cruise missiles. Now the Black Sea Fleet is able to fully control most of the Black Sea area, quickly transfer its forward units of marines and special forces, stationed in occupied Crimea and Krasnodar region of Russia, to the South Caucasus or Ukraine.

It is important to pay attention to the growing underwater activity of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in the Black Sea.



Source: «Black Sea Security», 2(38), 2020

According to the Association of Veterans of the Ukrainian Navy, to determine the surface and underwater situation in the close marine operation zone and the coastal zone of the Black Sea, a number of sonar systems, which are likely to be integrated into the Russian unified state system of surface and underwater situation, is deployed and their deployment continues. Thus, the Russian Federation creates additional advantages "from underwater", conducts preparation of the underwater bridgehead as an element of total control over the Black Sea.

In order to deter Russian aggression, on May 29, 2020, two B-1B Lancer aircraft flew from Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota (USA) to Europe via Poland, Ukraine, the Black Sea and Turkey, demonstrating that the Baltic - Black Sea countries are in the sphere of strategic interests of the United States. In addition, on June 12, 2020, on the Day of Russia, NATO recognized Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner. Ukraine also expects the arrival of American Mark VI patrol boats and a new batch of Javelin anti-tank missiles.

Russia's obstruction of freedom of navigation

The Russian Federation continues measures to blockade the Sea of Azov. In May 2020, the average duration of artificial detention by the Russian Federation of vessels going from the Black Sea to the Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov - Mariupol and Berdiansk, was 10.1 hours. This is the lowest figure since the beginning of the blockade of the Kerch Strait started in July 2018. However, it is impossible to speak about "termination of blockade" as the decrease of indicators is caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's disinformation measures to lift sanctions.

On July 1, 2020, rail cargo traffic on the Kerch Bridge began, and the Russian side applied the practice of temporarily blocking the movement of ships through the Kerch Strait. On July 2, despite favorable weather conditions, traffic through the Strait was blocked for 5 hours (from 05:00 to 10:00), due to the transfer of dangerous military cargo through the Kerch Bridge to occupied Crimea.

Russia continues the practice of creating obstacles to navigation in the Black Sea by "closing" the navigation in the western areas of the sea for Russian exercises with combat fire. In May 2020, several areas to the west from occupied Crimea were closed.

Human rights and national minorities

The Russian occupation authorities in Crimea continue to use the practice of imprisoning local people as part of politically motivated or falsified criminal prosecution. As of June 2020, there were at least 93 such persons. In May, the total number of Crimean residents deprived of their liberty in the so-called "Crimean Muslim case" was 65. Other 4 persons were restricted in their movement: 3 were under surveillance, 1 was under home arrest. The mechanism of intimidation includes searches conducted by Russian security forces in the homes of Crimean Tatars. Thus, on July 7, FSB officers conducted mass searches in four districts of occupied Crimea, and at least seven Crimean Tatars were detained.

Violations of the rights of Crimeans by the occupying authorities also include the spring conscription of Crimeans for military service in the Russian Armed Forces, as well as physical and psychological coercion to participate in the so-called "Constitutional Referendum" of June 25 - July 1, 2020.

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