

## Jane's Intelligence Review

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# The rising influence of Russian special forces

**Increased defence spending under Russian president Vladimir Putin has led to a resurgence in the Spetsnaz special forces. *Mark Galeotti* explains how these elite forces work and why they are at the forefront of Moscow's new non-linear military doctrine.**

The Russian Spetsnaz special forces have undergone a renaissance since Vladimir Putin's first accession to the Russian presidency in 2000, the stabilisation of the economy, and a substantial increase in defence spending. They played an important role in the second Chechen war (1999-2009), and the 2008 Georgian War. Moreover, the central part they played in the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and then supporting the eastern Ukrainian rebellion in Donetsk and Luhansk have demonstrated not just their resurgence as a force, but their central position in the new Russian 'art of war' in a complex age.

Russian military doctrine, like its Soviet predecessor, tends to concentrate on the employment of large, disciplined forces in carefully choreographed operations, with little room for small-unit initiative. However, Moscow has always recognised that there is a role for units that are able to operate independently and with initiative, especially in reconnaissance, diversionary, and intelligence roles. The Spetsnaz emerged as a result of this mindset, with the name being a contraction of *spetsialnogo naznacheniya*, meaning "of special purpose" or designation. This sums up the force's place in Russian military thinking.

'Special' refers not so much to individual soldiers as to the role they are expected to play. The future battlefield is unlikely to be marked by large-scale land wars between superpowers (for which the Soviets and Russians alike had planned) but rather disjointed local interventions, peacemaking missions, and ambiguous political-military operations such as that in eastern Ukraine, where war is neither declared nor desired. Consequently, Moscow is coming to realise that it has a need for flexible units able to operate in politically and operationally complex environments.

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### **Troubled transition**

Although Russia has a history of special operations, sabotage, and deep reconnaissance forces - not least the commandoes training partisans behind Axis lines during the Second World War - the modern Spetsnaz date back to the 1950s.



*Russian Navy Special Forces (Spetsnaz) soldiers on the water in Baltiysk, Russia, on 28th July 2013. Each of Russia's four fleets has its own Independent Naval Reconnaissance Spetsnaz Point. (PA)*

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In 1950, the GRU established a Naval Spetsnaz Brigade in each fleet, even though they were actually closer to a battalion in size. In the Soviet military lexicon, a brigade simply meant a specialised formation able to operate independently, beyond the usual chain of command. This was followed in 1957 by the formation of five regular Spetsnaz battalions, one for each of the wartime operational commands (called Fronts).

The primary role of the Spetsnaz was as a strategic asset to operate deep behind enemy lines on sabotage and reconnaissance missions, but especially to target NATO tactical nuclear weapons. Moscow was concerned that weapons such as Matador and Mace nuclear cruise missiles would offset Soviet armoured capabilities, and consequently that the Russian leadership needed assets able to locate them for air and artillery strikes, or to destroy them in a direct assault.

The Spetsnaz therefore had to be able to be inserted by stealth or parachute; to live off the land; to demonstrate far greater autonomy than most Soviet forces; and to act as both scouts and fighters.

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### **Spetsnaz structure**

There are seven regular Spetsnaz brigades known as Independent Special Designation Brigades (Otdel'naya brigada spetsial'nogo naznacheniya: obrSpN), along with one other brigade (the 100th), the 25th Independent Special Purpose Regiment (Otdel'niy polk spetsial'nogo naznacheniya: opSpN), and the forces attached to the new Special Operations Command. Each brigade is unique and made up of two or more Independent Special Purpose Detachments (Otdel'niy otryad spetsial'nogo naznacheniya: ooSpN), which is

in effect a regiment of approximately 500 personnel. Each brigade also has slight variations in strength, equipment, and training to reflect local conditions.

The 100th Brigade is a fully operational unit, but is especially tasked with testing new equipment, weapons, and tactics. Several reports, including in *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly* in March, have suggested it first fielded the new Ratnik battle dress and personal equipment suite now being issued across the military. Operators from the 100th were also among those who trialled the AK-12 assault rifle in 2013, a potential successor to the current standard-issue AKM-74.

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The 100th Brigade and the 25th opSpN were created during the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, ostensibly to provide additional security for the games. However, a General Staff officer told *IHS Jane's* in April 2014 that to a large extent this was a political pretext used by the GRU to expand the Spetsnaz. The source explained, "At that time, you could always get money out of the ministry of finance if you used the magic words, 'it's for Sochi.'"

There have been efforts to make the Spetsnaz an all-volunteer force, although successive deadlines for this to be done (in 1999, 2006, and 2013) have all passed without any change. However, the Spetsnaz are further along the path of reform than most of the military: some brigades are now entirely professional, while others are approximately 20-30% conscripted.

Although this ratio is better than most military units, it still means that the units are subject to the twice-yearly "churn" as draftees cycle in and out. However, even the professionals may not be particularly experienced, because perhaps as many as half are serving their first (and often only) three-year contract, having decided to enlist as a volunteer *kontraktnik* (contract soldier), trading better pay and conditions for a longer tour. Consequently, they may have only a year or two of training and experience under their belt.

This may explain why the majority of Spetsnaz, although undoubtedly an elite in comparison with the bulk of Russia's ground forces, should not be considered uniformly at 'Tier One' elite special forces level. However, Moscow's growing awareness that Russia did need such an "elite within an elite" led in 2010 to the announcement of the creation of the KSO, which was part of a general reshuffle of the Spetsnaz.

For some time, the ground forces had resented the GRU's control over the Spetsnaz, pressing a claim that an intelligence agency such as the GRU ought to concentrate on espionage, while a battlefield reconnaissance and commando force such as the Spetsnaz ought to be integrated directly into field commands.

The GRU's poor performance during the 2008 Georgian war, marked by a series of embarrassments that included friendly-fire incidents as a result of poor inter-service co-operation, gave the ground forces and their allies within the General Staff apparatus a pretext for action. One such incident involved the deaths of six paratroopers at Zugdidi, just outside Abkhazia, who were killed when Russian artillery units failed to lift their fire as the paratroopers assaulted the town.

As a result, in late 2010, operational command of the Spetsnaz brigades was transferred to the four military districts, which would become operational commands in time of war. At the same time, the KSO would be established as a strategic-level asset, and as the basis for the creation of genuinely top-echelon special forces teams. According to Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, speaking in June 2013, its primary missions would be foreign interventions, including sabotage and anti-terrorism operations.

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### **Spetsnaz in Crimea**

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014, following the collapse of the government of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich in February, represented a first test-run for the KSO and an opportunity for other Spetsnaz units to demonstrate their capacity after more than a decade of rearmament and reconsolidation.



*Pro-Russian soldiers march outside a Ukrainian military base in Perevalne, Crimea, on 20 March 2014. The annexation of Crimea in March represented a first test-run for the KSO and an opportunity for other Spetsnaz units to demonstrate their capacity. (PA)*

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With a new, West-leaning provisional government taking power in Kiev, Moscow was both concerned about the fate of Crimea - and the Black Sea Fleet base at Sevastopol, which is leased from Ukraine - and also aware that a unique opportunity had presented itself to consolidate support at home by seizing a territory that has been almost universally regarded as Russian soil despite former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev handing it to Ukraine in 1954.

On 22 February 2014, the day after Yanukovich fled Kiev, the VDV's 45th Regiment and the 3rd Spetsnaz Brigade were put on alert, while two ooSpN from the 16th Brigade were flown closer to Ukraine, to Rostov-on-Don, according to the Russian Center for Applied Strategies and Technologies.

After covert negotiations with members of the local ethnic Russian elite, who arranged for masked and armed "self-defence militias" (whose numbers included both local police and criminals) to begin appearing

on the streets, operators from the KSO and 45th opSpN were moved into the barracks of the 810th Independent Naval Infantry Brigade at Sevastopol.

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### **Eastern Ukraine**

The role of the Spetsnaz in the subsequent insurrection in eastern Ukraine is much less clear and more disputed, not least because Moscow claims it has no active servicemen in the region, merely "volunteers" who are there in their own time. However, this version of events has been debunked by Kiev, NATO countries, and journalists on the ground. For example, in August, UK prime minister David Cameron said he was concerned at the "mounting evidence that Russian troops have made large-scale incursions into southeastern Ukraine".



*A convoy of unmarked military vehicles in Donetsk on 11 November 2014. It is possible that the Vostok (East) Battalion that suddenly appeared in Donetsk in May was an ad hoc Spetsnaz force. (PA)*

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The role of the Spetsnaz in eastern Ukraine is much more subtle and indirect in most cases, with the forces probably having been used to train and co-ordinate local proxy forces, as well as provide security for arms supplies to the insurgents and, on occasion, remind them how far they need to recognise Moscow's authority.

Based on Ukrainian accounts, indiscreet social media comments from Russian soldiers on the ground, and Western intelligence reports, it seems clear that no single unit has been deployed. Instead, *IHS Jane's* assesses from numerous government and non-governmental reports that there have at various times been elements (often at no more than squad- or platoon-strength) from five brigades in eastern Ukraine: the 346th from the KSO, as well as the 2nd, 10th, 22nd, and 24th.

Some Western reports have also suggested that elements of the 100th Brigade have been deployed, possibly to offer specialised training on heavy weapons provided by Russia or to guard technicians training the insurgents. One source told *IHS Jane's* that troops from the 100th Brigade may have been present at

the crash site following the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 by a presumed rebel Buk surface-to-air missile on 17 July 2014, although if this is true it is likely that they were guarding specialists sent by Moscow to survey or contaminate the site.

In addition, the Vostok ("East") Battalion that suddenly appeared in Donetsk in May, and whose first act was to seize the militias' headquarters building in the city, appears to have been a GRU unit that was possibly an ad hoc Spetsnaz force.

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## **Outlook**

The use of the Spetsnaz in both Ukrainian operations offers some pointers about their role in future conflicts, in accordance with Russia's emerging ideas of asymmetric or 'non-linear' war. The essential Spetsnaz roles are four-fold, the first three of which are relatively conventional and broadly familiar to any special operations units.

First, the units undertake deep and battlefield reconnaissance. Although no longer as focused on seeking out enemy tactical nuclear weapons, the Spetsnaz will retain their role as forces that can be inserted behind enemy lines or that will maintain a low profile for long-term surveillance and reconnaissance missions.



*Special Forces soldiers, veterans, and members at a ceremony dedicated to special forces in St Petersburg on 29 August 2014. The majority of Spetsnaz are an elite in comparison with the bulk of Russia's ground forces. (PA)*

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Second, the Spetsnaz will act as the 'tip of the spear' in operations where they are needed to clear the way for less nimble forces in future interventions, relying on speed, stealth, and surprise to outweigh their lack of artillery and armour. For example, after the initial deployment of Spetsnaz into Crimea, Moscow moved quickly to bring in heavier forces (the 727th Independent Naval Infantry Battalion, the 291st Artillery Brigade, and the 18th Independent Motor Rifle Brigade) that would have been able to fight a conventional battle if Kiev had sought to contest the annexation.

Third, counter-insurgency operations will figure as a Spetsnaz focus. Soviet and then Russian doctrine traditionally assumed or asserted that Moscow would not be fighting counter-insurgency operations, and as a result many of the hard-earned lessons of Afghanistan were lost and had to be re-learned in Chechnya. However, Moscow now appreciates that it is likely to be engaged in counter-insurgency and low-intensity conflicts, whether within its own borders or during incursions into neighbouring states, and the Spetsnaz are to play a central role in such operations.

A fourth role of 'political operator' is much more distinctive, and places the Spetsnaz squarely into the same category as the intelligence services, propaganda machine, and other agents of what the Soviets called "active measures," or political warfare.

In an article that went unregistered at the time but proved to be a crucial statement of emergent Russian thinking on non-linear warfare, Gerasimov wrote in the *Military-Industrial Courier* in February 2013, "A perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war."

According to Gerasimov, the means of such devastation need not be conventionally kinetic. He added, "The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness... All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces. The open use of forces - often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation - is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict."

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#### SPETSNAZ LOOKALIKES

When one former spetsnazovets told *IHS Jane's* in February 2014 that "everybody's Spetsnaz these days", he was indulging in hyperbole, but with some reason. There are other military units that are effectively the same as the Spetsnaz, even if under other commands.

The most obvious would be the paratroopers' 45th Guards Independent Reconnaissance Regiment, based at Kubinka, outside Moscow. Several elite companies of razvedchiki (scouts) in units such as the 200th Independent Arctic Motor Rifle Brigade in Pechenga on the Norwegian border might also qualify.

However, the term 'Spetsnaz' has acquired sufficient cachet that it is used widely, and often indiscriminately, for a range of units. These range from genuine special forces - such as the FSB Alfa counter-terrorism teams - through to distinctly mundane elements, including the anti-poaching teams of Rosrybolovstvo, the Russian Fishery Agency.

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