

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

---

Volume 46  
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2016*

Article 4

---

Summer 6-1-2016

## Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas

Tor Bukkvoll

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [National Security Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas," *Parameters* 46, no. 2 (2016), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2917.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

## Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas

---

Tor Bukkvoll

© 2016 Tor Bukkvoll

**ABSTRACT:** Special operations forces have played an important role in Russian warfare against Ukraine. In Crimea, they engaged in mostly covert action tasks, whereas in Donbas they engaged in more regular special operations functions such as special reconnaissance, military assistance, and direct action. The annexation of Crimea was the first time in which the new Special Operations Command took on a leading role. Based on the Ukrainian experience, there is little reason to doubt Russian capacity in special operations has increased. This may have consequences for the contingency planning of other countries, including the United States.

This article investigates the roles special operations forces (SOF) have fulfilled in Russian warfare against Ukraine—both in Crimea and in Donbas. It starts with a brief survey of the different types of Russian SOF and how these forces fit into the “hybrid” warfare paradigm.<sup>1</sup> Russian special operations in both Crimea and Donbas are then analyzed in relation to standard categories of SOF tasks. Finally, the question of what lessons other countries, including the United States, may draw from the Crimea and Donbas examples is discussed.

First, a brief note on sources is necessary. Given the particularly secret nature of special operations, reliable data are difficult. This is even more so in this case due to the recent nature of the events and the current timidity of the Russian press. Barring a few media outlets and Internet sites, much investigative journalism is “scared into silence” in Russia today. Except for the officially admitted use of SOF in Crimea, and the arrest of two *Spetsnaz* GRU officers in Donbas in May 2015, there is little available in Russian open sources.

Hence, this study, relies to a large extent on Ukrainian sources. Since Ukraine is party to the conflict, these sources are obviously biased. The Ukrainian sources used are relatively independent from the Ukrainian government. Still, they are not objective. Most of them, understandably, display varying degrees of patriotism in the face of Russian military aggression.

---

A version of this article appeared in the *Aleksanteri Papers 1/2016* published by Kikimoro Publications at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki, Finland.

<sup>1</sup> Research for this article took place as part of the project Russian Hybrid Warfare: Definitions, Capabilities, Scope and Possible Responses financed by the Finnish Prime Minister’s Office.

Dr. Tor Bukkvoll is a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment. He is a specialist on Russia and Ukraine, particularly in the areas of defense and security policy.

On the other hand, since the presence of in-service Russian military personnel on Ukrainian soil has been demonstrated beyond doubt, there is little reason to assume Russian SOF are not there. No modern army would engage in a foreign mission of this scale without having designated roles for its SOF in operations. Thus, it would be in the details of how they operate, rather than in the fact of their presence, that the bias in Ukrainian sources could skew the analysis.

### Russian SOF in the Serdiukov Reforms<sup>2</sup>

Russia has many military and paramilitary formations that are called special operation forces or *Spetsnaz* (short for *spetsialnoe naznachenie* or special assignment). For this study, the special forces of the armed forces' Main Intelligence Directorate, *Spetsnaz* GRU, the special forces of the Federal Security Service (FSB), *Spetsnaz* FSB, the special forces of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), *Spetsnaz* SVR, the Special Operations Command (SOC) and the 45th Special Forces Regiment of the Airborne troops are the most relevant. One should note special forces only make up parts of each of these organizations. GRU, FSB, and SVR have a number of agencies beyond special forces, such as spying bureaus (*Agentura*), SIGINT (signal intelligence) units and others. These latter agencies are also included in this study, since they often work in close cooperation with "their" special forces. However, belonging to the same super-structure is no guarantee of close cooperation. The rivalry between *Spetsnaz* and *Agentura* within the GRU is well known.

*Spetsnaz* GRU is probably the most famous of the Russian SOF. This organization was established in the early 1950s, and it played an important role in the Russian warfare in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Consequently, most of the operational experience of the organization is as elite light infantry rather than as special forces in the current Western understanding of the term. Thus, *Spetsnaz*-GRU may today better be compared to the US Rangers than to the US Delta Force. This supportive role for *Spetsnaz*-GRU was to some extent formalized as part of the Serdiukov reforms. Here, the responsibility of *Spetsnaz* GRU as a provider of services to the other branches of the military was enhanced at the expense of its former more independent position.

In parallel, a new Special Operations Command (SOC) was established to be the military instrument most directly at the hands of the political leadership. *Spetsnaz* GRU consists of seven brigades spread around the country, with approximately 1,500 servicemen in each—battle and support units combined. In addition, there are four naval *Spetsnaz*-GRU detachments, one connected to each of the fleets. These latter detachments most likely have up to 500 servicemen each, again battle units and support personnel combined.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the total number of troops is probably plus/minus 12,000.<sup>4</sup> All *Spetsnaz*-GRU were supposed to be contract soldiers by the end of 2014. So far, however, it has been

2 Minister of Defense Anatolii Serdiukov in 2008 initiated a fundamental reform of all the Russian armed forces. The main element of this reform was the transition from mass mobilization to high-readiness troops, but the reform also changed many other aspects of organization.

3 "*Spetsnaz* BMF Rossii," <http://modernarmy.ru/article/254/spetchnaz-vmf-rossii> (accessed November 5, 2013); and Sergei Kozlov, 2010, *Spetsnaz GRU – Noveishaia istoria*, Russkaia Panorama, Moscow, 363.

4 Aleksandr Chuikov, "*Spetsnaz* soliuat voiedino," *Argumenty i Fakty*, January 28, 2010; and Sergei Kozlov, *Spetsnaz GRU – Noveishaia istoria*, 2010, 310.

difficult to find verification as to whether this aim was achieved or not. Conscripts have traditionally played a significant role in *Spetsnaz*-GRU.

The establishment of SOC was announced by Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, in March 2013, but it had been under development since 2009. It is modelled directly on the US Delta Force and the UK Special Air Service. The organization is divided into five special operations divisions with about 50 service personnel in each, and the total number of troops, including support personnel, is probably no more than 1,500.<sup>5</sup> The establishment of SOC was, and probably still is, resented within the GRU. SOC was seen as both a reason for, and a symbol of, GRU's institutional loss of status. The new special force was initially part of GRU, then removed from GRU, and is now again officially part of GRU, but with a very significant degree of autonomy. Also, recruitment often comes from outside GRU. The main strategic idea behind SOC is for the political leadership to have a small and very competent military tool at its disposal for national and international contingencies where the use of force is needed, but where one does not expect larger scale military action to follow.

The FSB has two *Spetsnaz* units—Alfa and Vypel. Alfa consists of five sub-units at different locations in Russia, and the main responsibility of the organization is anti-terror operations. Vypel consists of four sub-units, and has protection of strategic objects, such as nuclear plants, as the main responsibility. These special responsibilities, however, do not in any sense mean these forces cannot also be used for other purposes. The size of Alfa and Vypel together is probably between 300 and 500 troops.<sup>6</sup>

The 45th SOF Regiment of the Airborne forces basically fulfills the same type of SOF support for these forces as the army *Spetsnaz*-GRU does for the land forces and the navy *Spetsnaz*-GRU does for the naval infantry. Their number is probably around 700 troops.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the SVR has its own *Spetsnaz* with around 300 troops called *Zaslou* (covering force).<sup>8</sup> Their primary mission is the protection of Russian official personnel around the world, but they will also be available for other assignments.

## SOF and “Hybrid” Warfare

There have been numerous attempts to define the concept of hybrid warfare, and many also dismiss the concept. In terms of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, much of the focus has been on the use of non-military means for the achievement of strategic goals. It is, as pointed out by some scholars, important to keep in mind that “hybrid”

---

5 Alexey Nikolsky, “Russian Special Operations Forces: Further Development or Stagnation?” Moscow Defense Brief, No. 4, 2014, 25; and Alexey Nikolsky, “Little, Green and Polite – The Creation of Russian Special Operations Forces,” in *Brothers Armed – Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine - Second Edition*, ed. Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov, (Minneapolis, MN: East View Press, 2015), 128.

6 The exact figures are secret, but estimates such as these are available in open sources. See interview with former FSB colonel Sergei Shavrin at <http://www.agentura.ru/press/about/jointprojects/mn/shavrin>.

7 “*Spetsnaz* GRU i *spetsnaz* VDV: naidi desiat otlichii,” <http://1071g.ru/node/356> (accessed October 15, 2013).

8 “Razvedka budet igrat muskulami i vnutri strany,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, March 4, 1998.

refers to the means, not the principles or the goals of warfare.<sup>9</sup> SOF is by definition a military means. The use of SOF in regular battle would therefore fall outside most definitions of hybrid warfare. However, one could argue the use of SOF to attain political goals in non-combat settings would be an example of the use of these types of forces for hybrid warfare.

By NATO's classification, special operations can be divided into three main types: direct action, special reconnaissance, and military assistance.<sup>10</sup> This categorization, however, does not really accommodate some of the more covert "political" tasks that special forces sometimes execute. Since these latter missions are important in the present context, I use the concept of covert action in addition to the three NATO types to structure the analysis.<sup>11</sup> It is primarily in this covert action role that Russian SOF become a hybrid warfare tool. In the two cases below, we will see that Russian SOF were parts of larger regular operations in both Crimea and Donbas, but also that they played the hybrid warfare covert action role of influencing local political events in non-combat settings.

## Crimea

The Crimean operation, although most probably conducted according to existing contingency plans, was sudden and executed mostly without direct fighting. This means there was no direct action, and little time or need for military assistance from the Russian SOF. The operation was largely covert action, most likely based on intelligence gathered previously by units connected to the Russian Black Sea fleet and possibly local agents recruited by the FSB and GRU. Pre-deployment special reconnaissance by *Spetsnaz*-GRU may have taken place, but so far it has been difficult to find evidence of it in open sources. The Ukrainian military observer Dmytro Tymchuk claims both FSB and GRU became very active in Ukraine after Viktor Yanukovich became president in 2010. The latter made the Ukrainian security service, SBU, change its focus from counterespionage against Russia to counterespionage against the United States.<sup>12</sup> It would probably also be wrong to claim any significant military assistance role for the Russian SOF in Crimea, since the so-called "Crimea self-defense units" seem largely to have been *décor*, providing the Russian forces with a local image. The self-defense units did not play a very significant military role.<sup>13</sup>

---

9 Nadia Schadow, "The Problem with Hybrid Warfare," *War on the Rocks*, April 2, 2015, <http://warontherocks.com/2015/04/the-problem-with-hybrid-warfare/> (accessed April 26, 2016).

10 US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for Special Operations*, Joint Publication 3-015 (Washington, DC: US Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 16, 2014), [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp3\\_05.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_05.pdf).

11 The United States defines covert action as "an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly." See Aki J. Peritz and Eric Rosenbach, "Covert Action," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs Memorandum, July 2009, [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/19149/covert\\_action.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/19149/covert_action.html).

12 Dmytro Tymchuk, "Po deiatelnosti rossiiskikh spetssluzhb ha vostoce Ukrainy," *Informatsionoe Soprotilivlenie*, April 14, 2014, <http://sprotyv.info/ru/news/50-po-deyatelnosti-rossiiskikh-specsluzhb-na-vostoce-ukrainy>.

13 This is the general impression from reading one of the most detailed accounts of the operation in Crimea, Anton Lavrov, "Russian Again: The Military Operation for Crimea," in *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine - Second Edition*, ed. Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov (Minneapolis, MN: East View Press, October 2014), 157-184.

Since the operation in terms of SOF was largely a covert action, it was only to be expected that the newly created SOC would play the crucial role. According to Russian military observers Anton Lavrov and Alexey Nikolsky, the take-over of Crimea was the first operation of a significant scale undertaken by the SOC.<sup>14</sup> In particular, SOC was behind the seizing of the local parliament on September 27. This act made it possible to elect the Russian “marionette” Sergei Aksenov as new Crimean prime minister. Furthermore, SOC also led the take-over of the Ukrainian military’s headquarters and a number of other hard-target military compounds. These were, however, operations that demanded more troops than SOC could provide. The organization was therefore aided by units from *Spetsnaz*-GRU and naval infantry. The SOC, however, was always in the lead.<sup>15</sup>

The Crimean operation used speed and surprise to establish fait accompli on the ground, thus making a military response from the Ukrainian side difficult. True, the Russian victory was secured by the transfer of additional troops to the peninsula, but the initial action by SOC and other special and elite forces elements was the decisive element.<sup>16</sup> From the take-over of the Crimean parliament to the signing of the treaty making Crimea a part of Russia it took only 19 days. Seven days later all Ukrainian military units had laid down their arms. Such a time schedule makes the Crimean operation very different from the follow-on operation in Donbas.

## Donbas

Based mostly on “selfies” posted by Russian soldiers on the Internet, the volunteer Ukrainian group “InformNapalm” has identified by name a large number of individuals from different Russian SOF units on Ukrainian soil. These include all seven *Spetsnaz* GRU brigades, the VDV 45th Brigade, and the FSB.<sup>17</sup> No open source, however, seems to claim the SOC has taken part in these operations. According to the Russian military observer Alexey Nikolsky, “based on what we know about how SOF forces are utilized and for what purposes, it appears that there is no need for their [meaning SOC] presence in eastern Ukraine.”<sup>18</sup> So far this author has found no evidence to the contrary. Their absence in Donbas fits the image of SOC as an exclusive force used only where the chances of further fighting were small. It also underscores that SOC is a capability of such value and cost that it will be used mostly when others cannot do the job.

The first GRU operative was arrested on Ukrainian soil by the Ukrainian security service SBU in March 2014. He was arrested together with three others while gathering intelligence on Ukrainian military positions on the Chongar Peninsula just north of Crimea. His name was Roman Filatov, and he admitted to being an officer of GRU. As a result

---

14 Ibid., p. 160; and Nikolsky, “Little, Green and Polite,” 124.

15 Lavrov, “Russian Again,” 173-178.

16 “Special forces” are here understood as the ones listed under the subtitle Russian SOF and the Serdiukov reforms in this study. “Elite forces” are the airborne forces and the naval infantry. These are elite in the sense they have a much-higher degree of professional soldiers than regular army units, and the selection of personnel is much stricter.

17 InformNapalm, <https://informnapalm.org/12174-russianpresence>.

18 Nikolsky, “Little, Green and Polite,” 130.

of a personal deal between Russian Minister of Defense Shoigu and head of the Ukrainian presidential administration Serhiy Pashynsky, Filatov was sent back to Russia in exchange for Ukrainian Kontr-Admiral Serhii Haiduk and eight others then held hostage by the new Crimean authorities.<sup>19</sup>

Besides *Spetsnaz*-GRU, the Russian Internet site *Zabytii Polk* (Forgotten Regiment) claimed the 45th *Spetsnaz* Regiment had been present with a base in the Ukrainian city of Novoazovsk. Furthermore, the Ukrainian general staff claimed to have evidence the SVR had been active doing political work in the area, and both FSB special units, Alfa and Vypel, had taken part in the fighting. This latter claim, however, has so far been difficult to corroborate from other sources.<sup>20</sup>

Exactly when *Spetsnaz*-GRU first started to send operators into Donbas is still unknown. One of the first eyewitness accounts was provided by the Ukrainian war correspondent Inna Zolotukhina. In her book *Voina s perykhib dnei* (The War From Its First Days), she claims the forces occupying the SBU headquarters in the Eastern Ukrainian city of Sloviansk in late April 2014 “were dressed and equipped exactly as the fighters from Ramzan Kadyrov’s Vostok Battalion I had seen in Crimea two months earlier.”<sup>21</sup> She also contended “a highly placed representative of the local power structures [in Sloviansk] told me that about 150 instructors from GRU had been in place in the city for almost a month.”<sup>22</sup> If this information is correct, *Spetsnaz*-GRU may have been on the ground in Eastern Ukraine as early as mid-March 2014. That is a month before the Donbas anti-Kiev rebellion became full blown.

Ukrainian oligarch Serhiy Taruta has also confirmed Russian special operations forces most likely had a role in the initiation of the rebellion. Taruta took part in the Ukrainian government’s negotiations with the rebels in Donetsk. According to him, on April 8 the Ukrainian authorities were able to bribe the rebels, who had taken over the town hall in Donetsk, to leave the building. However, as soon as that agreement was clear, “green men” came to Donetsk from Sloviansk and changed the mind of the Donetsk rebels. After that visit, a compromise was no longer possible.<sup>23</sup> This evidence suggests Russia was involved in initiating parts of the anti-Kiev rebellion in Donbas, and Russian SOF was one of the main tools. This is a prime example of the use of SOF in a covert operation hybrid warfare role. At the same time, the evidence in

19 Iurii Butusov, “Kak ukrainskaia kontrrazvedka rovno god nazad zakhvatila pervogo shpiona v rossiisko-ukrainskoi voine,” *Tsensor.net*, March 12, 2015, [http://censor.net.ua/resonance/328206/kak\\_ukrainskaya\\_kontrrazvedka\\_rovno\\_god\\_nazad\\_zahvatila\\_pervogo\\_shpiona\\_v\\_rossiysk-oukrainskoyi\\_voyine](http://censor.net.ua/resonance/328206/kak_ukrainskaya_kontrrazvedka_rovno_god_nazad_zahvatila_pervogo_shpiona_v_rossiysk-oukrainskoyi_voyine).

20 See [http://joinfo.ua/politic/1057527\\_Rossiyskie-aktivisti-opublikovali-polniy-spisok.html](http://joinfo.ua/politic/1057527_Rossiyskie-aktivisti-opublikovali-polniy-spisok.html); and “Rossiiskaia armiya i spetssluzhby RF v voine protiv Ukrainy,” *Tsensor.net*, November 25, 2014, [http://censor.net.ua/resonance/313320/rossiyskaya\\_armiya\\_i\\_spetssluzhby\\_rf\\_v\\_voyine\\_protiv\\_ukrainy](http://censor.net.ua/resonance/313320/rossiyskaya_armiya_i_spetssluzhby_rf_v_voyine_protiv_ukrainy).

21 The Vostok Battalion, consisting largely of Chechen fighters, was directly subordinated to GRU in the years 1999-2008. In 2008, it was officially disbanded, but according to Ivan Sukhov, a Russian journalist and Caucasus expert, it was “never really broken up, just re-profiled and incorporated into a Defense Ministry unit based in Chechnya.” See Claire Bigg, “Vostok Battalion: A Powerful New Player in Eastern Ukraine,” *RadioFree Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 30, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/vostok-battalion-a-powerful-new-player-in-eastern-ukraine/25404785.html>.

22 Inna Zolotukhina, *Voina s perykhib dnei* (Kiev: Folio, 2015), 70.

23 Sonia Koshkina, *Maidan – Neraskazannaia Istoria* (Kiev: Brait Books, 2015), 400.

no way excludes that there also was significant local initiative for rebellion against Kiev.<sup>24</sup>

While Crimea for Russian SOF was mostly about covert action, their involvement in the Donbas war also saw them engaged in the full spectrum of regular SOF tasks from July-August 2014 onwards. The Ukrainian military observer Konstantin Mashovets claims *Spetsnaz*-GRU at any time have had from three to four combined units/battalions in Donbas. These units have contained roughly 250 to 300 fighters each, and have been provided to the theater of operations on a rotational basis among the seven Russian *Spetsnaz* GRU brigades. They have operated in groups of 10-12 individuals, and worked closely with GRU SIGINT units.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of Russian SOF relations with the local rebels, the former trained and provided intelligence for the latter. At the same time, there has been a reluctance to operate together, especially in the cases where Russian not-in-service volunteers have been able to do the same job. Mashovets further claims each *Spetsnaz*-GRU group has been set up with “curators” from *Agentura*-GRU. Thus, the Russian tactic seems to have been to keep political and military assignments somewhat separate. *Spetsnaz*-GRU do special reconnaissance and military assistance, whereas the political work is taken care of by embedded “curators” from *Agentura*-GRU.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of direct action, Russian SOF in general have tried to avoid direct combat in Donbas. This, however, has not always been possible. For example, one of the GRU officers identified in Donbas is an individual known as Krivko. He was wounded in battle at Sanzjarovka at the end of January 2015. Simultaneously, in May 2015, two soldiers from the 16th brigade in Tambov were wounded in battle by Stsastyje near Luhansk.<sup>27</sup> These examples suggest *Spetsnaz*-GRU has been only partially successful in avoiding participation in regular battle.

Another area of direct action has been sabotage in Ukrainian rear areas. One example, of a sabotage mission gone wrong, was the killing of an alleged Russian GRU-agent in Kharkov in September 2014. He was suspected of blowing up train wagons with air fuel at Osnova railway station, probably in order to create problems for Ukrainian military aviation.

Ukrainian sources additionally claim combined groups of rebels and *Spetsnaz*-GRU increased their activities in Ukrainian rear areas in

---

24 This point is currently contested among specialists. For emphasis on the local initiative, see Serhiy Kudelia, “Domestic Sources of the Donbas Insurgency,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 351. For a stronger emphasis on Russia’s role, see Andreas Umland, “In Defence of Conspirology,” <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/defense-conspirology-rejoinder-serhiy-kudelia-anti-political-analysis-hybrid-war-eastern-and-yuriy-matsiyevsky>, “The Limits of Kudelia’s Argument: On the Sources of the Donbas ‘Insurgency,’” PONARS Eurasia, October 31, 2014, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/limits-kudelia-argument-sources-donbas-insurgency>.

25 Konstantin Mashovets, “O turistakh Putina ili voina malykh grupp,” *Informatsionnoe soprotilenie*, July 30, 2015, <http://sprotiv.info/ru/news/kyev/o-turistakh-putina-ili-voyna-malykh-grupp>.

26 Ibid.

27 Falcon Bjorn, “‘Royal Flush’: Russian Special Forces Soldier Fighting in Ukraine Showed Us All!” *InformNapalm*, May 28, 2015 <https://informnapalm.org/en/royal-flush-russian-special-forces-soldier-fighting-in-ukraine-showed-us-all/>; and Falcon Bjorn, “Ukrainian Army Destroys Russian *Spetsnaz* GRU Recon Group Near Shchastya and Captures Two Russian Servicemen,” *InformNapalm*, May 17, 2015, <https://informnapalm.org/en/ukrainian-military-destroys-a-russian-spetsnaz-incursion-into-shchastya-and-captures-two-wounded-spetsnaz-troops/>.

the summer of 2015. This activity included mine-laying and attacks at poorly guarded Ukrainian transport convoys.<sup>28</sup>

A somewhat different direct-action activity has been the responsibility of the FSB special forces. The Ukrainian military observer Dmytro Tymchuk states that the FSB special forces have had supervision and disciplining of the different separatist groups as a special responsibility. This has included both diplomacy and more “physical measures” against recalcitrant individuals.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, as in most countries, there are problems with the coordination of policies among different agencies. Russian observer Konstantin Gaaze claims there are at least three different agencies of the Russian state that implement policy in Donbas. Those are often neither willing nor able to coordinate their efforts. For example, presidential adviser Vladislav Surkov has supervised the DNR/LNR political leaderships, whereas the Russian military have been directing the DNR/LNR militaries. In addition, the FSB has done things on its own that very few have heard about. None of the three, according to Gaaze, have informed each other very much about their doings.<sup>30</sup> In October 2015, however, according to Ukrainian sources, a joint coordination center was established between the GRU and FSB in Donetsk to deal with the problem.<sup>31</sup>

In summary, the Russian use of SOF in Crimea and Donbas may be illustrated by the following table:

|                        | Crimea | Donbas |
|------------------------|--------|--------|
| Direct action          |        | X      |
| Special reconnaissance | X      | X      |
| Military assistance    |        | X      |
| Covert action          | X      | X      |

### Implications for the United States

As always will be the case, characteristics particular to these two operations will limit what other countries can learn from them. Both the presence of significant, largely ethnic Russian, pro-Russia elements in the populations, and the historical ties of these areas to Russia, set Crimea and Donbas apart from many other areas where Russia may get into conflict in the future. Despite this fact, at least three broad lessons can be learned.

First, the increased Russian ability to deploy SOF at high speed to a conflict zone is worth attention. It is especially the establishment of the

<sup>28</sup> See “*Spetsnaz GRU nachal okhotitsia na ukrainskykh voennykh v tylu*,” *Novoe Vremia*, July 17, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Tymchuk in Viktor Stepanenko, “Rossiiskikh grushnikov na okkupirovannykh territoriiakh smeniaet FSB,” *Novoe Vremia*, October 20, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Konstantin Gaaze, “Vybor Surkova: zachem Kreml opiat meniaet donetskoe nachalstvo,” *Forbes Russia*, September 7, 2015, <http://www.forbes.ru/mneniya-column/vertikal/298849-vybor-surkova-zachem-kreml-opyat-menyaet-donetskoe-nachalstvo>.

<sup>31</sup> <http://nv.ua/ukraine/events/vtorgshiesja-v-ukrainu-fsb-i-gru-obedinilis-dlja-teraktov-i-diversij---is-78415.html>.

SOC that has strengthened Russia's capability in this area. In Crimea they were very rapidly able to create a fait accompli on the ground that Ukrainian authorities found it hard to respond to. It is possible to imagine something similar also in Russia's relations with other countries. If, in a conflict of interest between Russia and another state, Russia uses SOF to quickly establish a fait accompli, the host government may face a serious dilemma. Accepting what Russia has done will not be easy, but risking escalation to a full-scale conflict by striking back is not easy either. That is especially the case if the actual material and/or political damage of accepting the new status quo is limited. NATO countries, furthermore, must take into account how other members of the alliance are likely to judge the new situation. Just because the host government may think a military response is justified, this does not mean the other members of the alliance think likewise. There will be serious worries about escalation. The host government should probably secure clarity on the issue of assistance before deciding on its own type of response.

Second, Russian use of SOF in particular, and hybrid warfare in general, will probably look very different from case to case. Thus, training according to Ukraine-like scenarios may be of limited value. Instead, each country needs to identify what their particular vulnerabilities may be in the case of a potential conflict with Russia. Efforts to deal with these vulnerabilities should be the main focus.

Third, the effect of the use of SOF may be enhanced by the simultaneous use of other, non-military, tools. In the cases of Crimea and Donbas, this was propaganda by state-controlled Russian television and disruption of the normal information infrastructure. In other cases, it may be something totally different. The main lesson is to be ready for the fact that several threats are likely to manifest themselves at the same time.

Also for the United States, the increased Russian ability to conduct high-speed limited scope military operations with SOF against US allies should be of concern. Reaction will be easier if the right mix of military and/or political response has been given some thought in advance. In terms of NATO solidarity, the threshold for Article 5 assistance may become more blurred.

Another potential development with possible consequences for the United States could be that Russia exports its new model for SOF to other countries. Russia already has some experience in this field, helping establish SOF in Ethiopia in the late 1990s. Russia often cooperates in the military sphere with countries that have strained relations with the United States. Stronger SOF capabilities among potential US adversaries may have consequences for US contingency planning.

Unless there is a change of regime, Russia's relations with many countries look set to be challenging for years to come. This means that even if Russia is not actively seeking confrontation, diverging interests and interpretations of political realities are likely to make conflict a real possibility. For many countries, until a broader understanding and more stable relations with Russia have been achieved, the danger of violent conflict remains a possibility. In this setting, growing Russian SOF capabilities are a particular concern.

