

## The New York Times

# *Ukraine, on a War Footing, Looks Westward for Help*

By **Andrew Higgins**

Nov. 30, 2018

KIEV, Ukraine — With 24 of his sailors and three of his warships held captive by Russia after a confrontation on Sunday in waters near Crimea, the commander of Ukraine's tiny navy declared that Russia under President Vladimir V. Putin was “the plague of the 21st century” and vowed that it must be stopped.

But the commander was not suggesting that Ukraine fight to the last man. “Of course, we can't beat them,” the commander, Vice Adm. Ihor Voronchenko, acknowledged.

Instead, Ukraine has proposed that Turkey, a member of NATO, seal off the Bosphorus, one of the world's busiest waterways, and that the alliance send a convoy into the Sea of Azov.

The chances of any of that happening are near zero, but the Ukrainian commander's Hail Mary proposal highlights the extent to which the country is dependent on outside help as it struggles to hold its own as a sovereign state in the face of a hostile Kremlin.

The episode has also put a spotlight on a vexing question that has dogged Ukraine's efforts to break out of Moscow's orbit since its 2014 revolution: Just how far is the West willing to go to help a country addled by corruption but, for all its problems, offers its citizens liberties, including real elections and a free press, that Mr. Putin has ground to dust in Russia?

Nearly a week after Russia opened fire on Ukrainian naval vessels passing from the Black Sea to the adjoining Sea of Azov, there is little agreement on what triggered the sudden escalation in a four-year-long confrontation between the two neighbors: a power play by Moscow or just a minor “border incident, nothing more,” as Mr. Putin said.

What is not in dispute, though, is that Ukraine is now in a curious state of high anxiety. Officials are warning that the country could well face a major war with Russia while insisting that a declaration of martial law will have no effect on ordinary life.

Tensions were raised further on Friday when Russia said it was transferring the three Ukrainian ship captains to Moscow and Ukraine said all Russian men between the ages of 16 and 60 would be barred from entering the country.

Yet, for the capital of a country now on a war footing, Kiev seems bizarrely calm. The only tangible signs of panic are the anxious phone calls and email messages from friends and relatives living abroad and wild accounts in the Russian news media of Ukrainians digging trenches and stocking food.

“People I haven’t heard from in years are contacting me in a panic to ask whether I am safe,” said Andrew Bain, a retired United States Marine Corps officer who served in Iraq and now runs a business in the Ukrainian capital. “It is fairly comical given how calm Kiev is.”

Ukraine’s desperate pleas for help, however, have put its friends abroad in an agonizing dilemma: how to support the country without stoking an even wider conflict or playing into Ukraine’s labyrinthine political feuds before the presidential election in March.

As has often been the case since relations with its neighbor curdled after the ouster of Ukraine’s pro-Russian president in 2014, Kiev says it is not appealing for charity but simply to the self-interest of the United States and its allies.

“Ukraine is now protecting the Western world, not only itself,” Admiral Voroncheko told a meeting in Kiev on Thursday attended by a counterpart from the United States Sixth Fleet, a British naval commander, foreign military attachés and other military experts.

For more than four years, ever since Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine and fomented a separatist rebellion in the country’s Russian-speaking east, the Ukrainian military has managed to hold Russia and rebels armed by Moscow to a standstill in a grinding, undeclared war of attrition on land. More than 10,000 people have been killed.

But the clash at sea last weekend marked the first time the Russian military has confronted Ukraine openly instead of through special forces without insignia and local proxies. That has opened a dangerous new front in which Ukraine knows it cannot possibly prevail on its own.



Ukrainian sailors seized by Russia last Sunday were transferred to a district court in Simferopol, Crimea, on Wednesday. Artur Shwarz/EPA, via Shutterstock

Dozens of shipping vessels have been left stranded, unable to enter or exit the Sea of Azov because of what Ukraine has described as effectively a naval blockade of cities on its southeastern coast.

Fear that Russia intends to slowly strangle a coastal region that is still under the control of the government in Kiev but perilously close to territory occupied by Russian-backed separatists has led to a flurry of anguished appeals in Kiev for political and military help.

“We obviously can’t compete with Russia by force,” said Hanna Hopko, chairwoman of the Ukrainian Parliament’s foreign affairs committee.

Ms. Hopko and others are demanding tougher sanctions on Russia to deter what they describe as brazen aggression at sea. Europe, already divided over whether to continue existing sanctions imposed in 2014, is split even further over any new measures.

It took the European Union three days to issue a simple statement expressing “utmost concern” over the events near Crimea and demand that Russia release the detained Ukrainian sailors.

Even less likely to find much support is a proposal by the president of Ukraine, Petro O. Poroshenko, that NATO send warships into the disputed Sea of Azov. NATO says it has no plans to do this.

Russian efforts to impede access to the Sea of Azov, which is guaranteed by a treaty signed by Moscow and Kiev in 2003, started the clash on Sunday, with Russia opening fire when three vessels from the Ukrainian Navy — two small gunboats and a tugboat — tried to enter through the Kerch Strait between Russia and Crimea.

Russia denies doing anything wrong, despite photographs showing what look like large holes in at least one Ukrainian ship from shell fire, and it accused Kiev of provoking the crisis at the behest of the United States.

President Trump, after initially suggesting that both sides were to blame for the flaring tensions, on Thursday tilted toward supporting Ukraine, or at least its demand that Russia return its seized ships and sailors.

Mr. Trump also announced that he was canceling a meeting planned with Mr. Putin at a get-together of leaders of the G-20 industrialized nations in Argentina because of the Russian actions at sea. But Ukraine wants far more than just a gesture of sympathy from the president.

Warships from the United States regularly cruise the Black Sea but have avoided passing into the Sea of Azov under a new Russia-built bridge to Crimea across the Kerch Strait. Anders Aslund, a Russia expert at the Atlantic Council, said the United States must be more assertive if Mr. Putin is to be restrained, but there is little appetite in Washington to put American sailors in harm's way.

There are also concerns that a highly unpopular Mr. Poroshenko has seized on the crisis to lift his flagging political fortunes and muffle his many critics before the presidential election. Western diplomats in Kiev said they were particularly concerned by the president's decision to impose martial law, which was approved in a watered-down form by a large majority of legislators.

Speaking in Kiev on Thursday, the American ambassador, Marie L. Yovanovitch, described the firing on Ukrainian naval vessels and the capture of their sailors by Russia as a "dangerous escalation and part of a pattern of Russia's malign activities." But she also called the imposition of martial law a "grave decision" and added that the way it is carried out "will be closely watched."

Ms. Hopko, the foreign affairs committee chairwoman, dismissed worries that civil liberties could be at risk, saying that those fears had been fueled by Russian propaganda painting Ukraine as a lawless land overrun by fascists.

Andrii Klymenko, chairman of Maidan of Foreign Affairs, a research group in Kiev that has monitored Russian restrictions on shipping in the Sea of Azov, said Moscow had sharply increased efforts to impede access to the sea after Mr. Putin opened the new bridge in May, built

at a cost of more than \$3 billion by a construction company owned by a close friend of the president.

After letting ships pass freely for years, Russia stopped 21 vessels in May, 25 in June and 40 in July, he said. But Russian interference fell sharply after Ukraine announced the opening in September of a small naval base in Berdyansk to defend its Sea of Azov coastline. Russia halted only two ships in October for inspection by the Federal Security Service, known as the F.S.B.

“This shows that when we go on the offensive we get results,” Mr. Klymenko said, adding that Russia is “always very brave when it outnumbers us 20-1, but it thinks twice if there is more of a balance of force.”

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 1, 2018, on Page A7 of the New York edition with the headline: NATO, Monitoring Ukraine Crisis, Makes No Effort to Engage Russia