



A Companion Paper to the Black Sea Fleet Series by Robin Ashby. Research support by Claude.ai

The Sea of Azov is the smallest of the seas that touch European Russia, and for a decade now the one most completely under one flag. It has one door. Understanding who holds the key tells you most of what you need to know.

I. The Lock

The Kerch Strait is four kilometres wide at its narrowest point, and every vessel bound for Mariupol, Berdyansk, Taganrog or Rostov-on-Don passes beneath the Crimean Bridge or does not pass at all.¹ Russia has controlled both shores since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and built the bridge, completed in 2018 at a cost of \$3.7 billion, in defiance of a 2003 treaty intended to leave the strait and the sea itself as shared 'historical internal waters' of Russia and Ukraine.²

The treaty's legal force is still argued in international fora; Russia's conduct has rendered the argument largely academic.³

The strait acquired a second identity once the full invasion began: logistics artery. It became the umbilical cord for Russian forces across southern Ukraine, and so a target — a truck bomb in October 2022, Ukrainian naval drones in July 2023, underwater charges against the bridge's supports in June 2025.⁴ It survives each attack diminished rather than destroyed, which is roughly its designed purpose.

The precedent for who is master of the strait was set on 25 November 2018, before the wider war, when Russian coast-guard vessels fired on and seized three Ukrainian naval craft — two gunboats and a tug — attempting the transit under the 2003 treaty's terms. The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea ordered the sailors released; Russia complied, but the message had already landed.⁵

II. The Order of Battle

There is no single 'Azov Fleet' in the old Tsarist or wartime Soviet sense of a unified command — what has grown up since 2014 is a patchwork, administratively untidy, operationally dense. The Black Sea Fleet garrisons shore facilities around the Azov coast in Krasnodar Krai and Rostov Oblast, an extension of the wider fleet dispositions already set out in Part One of this series.⁶ A locally raised Azov Flotilla, formed by the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic in February 2016 and consisting of seven armed cutters based at Novoyazovsk, Bezymennoye and Sedovo, was absorbed into the Russian order of battle after 2022; its original purpose,

according to Russian commentary at the time, was frankly stated as preparing 'a strike at Mariupol from the sea.'⁷ FSB coastal-guard units handle inspection, harassment and interdiction — the branch responsible for the 2018 Kerch incident above — while Rosgvardia, the National Guard, holds bridge-security responsibility for the Crimean Bridge itself and, since the occupation, fields the 1st Azov Corps garrisoning Mariupol directly.⁸

The sea's other approach is inland. The Volga-Don Canal links the Caspian to the Sea of Azov, and Russia has used it more than once to move warships between fleets without exposing them to the Black Sea's open water or the Montreux Convention's restrictions — a route already flagged as a watch item in this series' Black Sea Fleet Part Two, and one Jamestown analysts assessed, when five vessels moved from the Caspian Flotilla to Azov, as offensive rather than defensive in intent, better suited to 'launching an attack on coastal facilities' than any genuine bridge-defence requirement.⁹ The companion paper on the Caspian Fleet in this series covers the vessels and the canal's capacity in more detail.¹⁰

This is occupation-and-interdiction architecture, not a blue-water fleet. It reflects a doctrine visible elsewhere in Russia's near seas — the ambition, as one European parliamentarian put it in discussing the pattern's Baltic analogue in the Vistula Lagoon, to convert a shared sea into 'internal lakes' with limited access.¹¹

III. Novorossiia by Other Means

The economic architecture is the more patient instrument. Mariupol and Berdyansk were formally added to Russia's public list of ports open to international shipping in August 2025, with dredging and channel-deepening tenders exceeding \$13 million posted on Russian state procurement sites since 2023 to let larger vessels return.¹² Satellite imagery has shown new dock facilities and growing coal stockpiles at Mariupol; vessel-tracking data recorded eighteen cargo vessels, Russian and foreign-flagged, departing Mariupol and Berdyansk between July and November 2025 alone, most bound for Turkish ports.¹³

The commodity moving through those cranes is stolen. Russia harvested an estimated 30 million metric tons of grain and oilseeds from the occupied territories in the war's first three years, a figure that may reach 50 million by mid-2026 including the current season.¹⁴ Ukraine's foreign minister put 2025 grain exports through these channels at roughly 2 million metric tons, sold on to buyers in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe — with Kyiv separately accusing Israel and Egypt of accepting looted shipments, and one OCCRP investigation tracing grain via a Turkish intermediary as far as the UN World Food Programme's own supply chain.¹⁵ Close to 90,000 tons of wheat moved through occupied Mariupol in 2026 alone by Ukrainian government reckoning.¹⁶ What remains of the city's steel capacity — Azovstal and the Ilyich works together once accounted for close to 40% of Ukraine's national smelting capacity — is reportedly being cut for scrap by units of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's Akhmat formation rather than rebuilt.¹⁷

Behind the port sits infrastructure meant to outlast any ceasefire. Moscow allocated roughly \$11.8 billion to the four occupied Ukrainian regions between 2024 and 2026 under federal priority-development programmes — nearly three times the combined sum given to some twenty genuine Russian federal regions under comparable schemes in the same period.¹⁸

Flagship projects include a 525-kilometre 'Novorossiia Railways' system begun in 2023 and a planned 'Azov Ring' of roads intended to bind southern Russia to the occupied territories and Crimea in a single logistics web; the stated purpose of a new Donetsk-Mariupol spur announced for 2026 is tourism, ahead of the 'resort season', though Mariupol's exiled city council judges its real function to be moving military equipment and looted steel.¹⁹ Vladimir Putin has framed the

whole programme in explicitly imperial terms, describing the reclaimed territories in a 'reunification' anniversary address as a revival of 'our ancestral, historical Russian lands.'²⁰

IV. The Human Ledger

What this looks like on the ground bears little resemblance to the reconstruction Moscow advertises. One investigation found only 79 of at least 527 condemned buildings rebuilt in Mariupol at time of reporting, with the project on its current trajectory not finished until 2043.²¹ The Starokrymske reservoir, the city's sole water source since the Siverskyi Donets-Donbas canal stopped functioning, has dried up by 85%; residents receive water for four hours every two or three days.²² The city has lost roughly four-fifths of its pre-war population of half a million, with Russian resettlement — reportedly discussed at the Kremlin's own 'Integration-2025' forum in terms of relocating over five million Russian citizens into occupied Ukraine by 2030 — filling the gap, and mass 'nationalisation' proceedings now under way against the flats of residents who fled and cannot or will not return with a Russian passport in hand.²³ Ukrainian and independent Russian commentary alike draw the same comparison, to Grozny after the Second Chechen War: showpiece reconstruction on one square, ruin and forced demographic replacement behind it.²⁴

V. The Sea Contested

None of this is settled ground, whatever the dredging tenders imply, and June and July 2026 have supplied the proof. Ukrainian strikes against the Azov coastline intensified sharply from early June, reaching Berdyansk, Mariupol, Taganrog, Azov, Yeysk, Temryuk and the Kerch Strait approaches themselves — port cranes, substations, fuel depots and vessel traffic control facilities among the targets. On 5 June eight fuel storage tanks at Mariupol were destroyed outright and nine more damaged; a further strike on 10 June knocked out the port's electricity, and Russia's own 1st Azov Corps publicly conceded its logistics capacity had been 'substantially reduced.'²⁵

That was the reconnaissance phase. From the night of 6–7 July, Ukraine's Unmanned Systems Forces turned from the port infrastructure to the ships themselves, in an operation of a different order of magnitude entirely. The Kairos Battalion of the 414th Unmanned Strike Aviation Brigade — known informally as 'Magyar's Birds' after its commander, Robert 'Madyar' Brovdi — launched successive waves of Fire Point FP-1 and FP-2 one-way attack drones against the shadow-fleet tanker convoys resupplying Crimea.²⁶ The FP-2 variant now reportedly carries a 200-kilogram warhead out to 370 kilometres, guided to target via satellite data link rather than launched to search an area — a strike drone in the proper sense, not a loitering munition, but with reach sufficient to put Brovdi's forces in effective fire control of most of the Sea of Azov.²⁷ The claimed tallies, drawn from Brovdi's own nightly reporting and treated by Kyiv's own press as unverified but directionally credible, escalated by the day: eight tankers struck on the opening night, twenty-one within seventy-two hours, thirty-five by the third night, and on the night of 10–11 July a further twenty-one tankers and seven support vessels, seventy-three successful strikes claimed in a single raid. Wikipedia's running tally puts the cumulative figure at forty-two of roughly fifty tankers struck in the Sea of Azov during 6–10 July alone.²⁸ The consequence was immediate and measurable, which the claims themselves were not: Reuters reported on 10 July, citing sources inside Russia's grain export industry, that Moscow suspended navigation through the Don-Azov Canal, and that Russian border guards stopped accepting applications for Kerch Strait transit from 6:10pm local time that evening, with no date given for restoration. Market analysts cited put up to a quarter of Russia's wheat exports as transiting the Sea of Azov.²⁹ A state with no standing navy had, for the moment, closed the

door this paper opened with.

VI. Assessment

The Sea of Azov shows Russia's method for consolidating a captured littoral in miniature: seize both shores, control the single door, build the roads and railways that make the annexation load-bearing rather than declaratory, and dress the extraction of grain and steel as reconstruction for an audience that has largely stopped watching. It is the same pattern this series traced in the Black Sea Fleet's retreat to Novorossiysk and its dependence on the Volga-Don back door — Azov is not a separate theatre so much as the inland flank of the same campaign, held by different uniforms and financed by a different ministry.³⁰ Whether it stays held was never going to be answered by Mariupol's cranes so much as by whether Ukraine could keep reaching them. As of this week, the answer is that a handful of one-way attack drones, flown by a unit most of Europe had never heard of a fortnight ago, have done more to interrupt the Kremlin's Azov project than four years of sanctions — not by breaking the occupation, but by proving, night after night, that the lake is not yet closed.

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Notes

1. GEOPOL, 'Kerch Strait: The Lock on the Sea of Azov', 2026. [HIGH — analytical secondary source, geography and chronology independently verifiable.]
2. Middle East Institute, 'Russian Dominance in the Black Sea: The Sea of Azov', 2025 (bridge cost, \$3.7bn); European Council on Foreign Relations, 'Strait to War? Russia and Ukraine Clash in the Sea of Azov', 2020 (2003 treaty terms). [MEDIUM/HIGH — established facts, dated sourcing on treaty background.]
3. GEOPOL, 'Kerch Strait: The Lock on the Sea of Azov', 2026. [HIGH — reflects unresolved ITLOS/arbitration status as of publication.]
4. GEOPOL, 'Kerch Strait: The Lock on the Sea of Azov', 2026, citing the October 2022 bridge bombing, July 2023 naval drone strike, and June 2025 SBU underwater charge attack. [HIGH — each incident independently reported at the time by multiple outlets.]
5. Wikipedia, 'Kerch Strait Incident', citing contemporaneous reporting on the 25 November 2018 seizure of Berdyansk, Nikopol and Yany Kapu. [HIGH — extensively documented, ITLOS ruling a matter of public record.]
6. Wikipedia, 'Black Sea Fleet', current order-of-battle summary. See also Robin Ashby, Black Sea Fleet Part One, Defence Viewpoints / Substack, June 2026, for the fleet's wider Crimean and Novorossiysk dispositions. [HIGH for basing geography; cross-reference is this author's own prior work.]
7. Jamestown Foundation, 'Moscow Shifts Flotilla From Caspian to Azov Sea, Giving It a New Offensive Capability', Eurasia Daily Monitor, citing Russian commentator Sergey Ishchenko (Svobodnaya Pressa) on the 2016 DPR flotilla's basing and purpose. [MEDIUM — analytical assessment built on a Russian-language open source; the 'strike at Mariupol' characterisation is

the source's own words, not this author's.]

8. Composite of Wikipedia 'Kerch Strait Incident' (FSB role) and open Ukrainian/Russian reporting on National Guard bridge security and 1st Azov Corps deployment to Mariupol.

[ASSESSED — no single authoritative published ORBAT exists; this is a synthesis across sources of varying reliability and should be treated as indicative rather than definitive.]

9. Jamestown Foundation, 'Moscow Shifts Flotilla From Caspian to Azov Sea', on the transfer of five Caspian Flotilla vessels via the Volga-Don Canal. See also Robin Ashby, Black Sea Fleet Part Two, Defence Viewpoints / Substack, June 2026, 'The Waterway Question'. [MEDIUM — Jamestown's offensive-intent assessment is analytical judgement, not confirmed Russian doctrine.]

10. Robin Ashby, Russia's Caspian Fleet paper (UK Defence Forum / Russia Observatory series). [Self-reference — see that paper for vessel-level detail and canal transit capacity.]

11. Center for International Maritime Security, 'Sea of Azov', citing European Parliament SEDE committee hearings and MEP Anna Fotyga's remarks drawing the Vistula Lagoon parallel. [MEDIUM — dated to 2018 hearings; cited here for the doctrinal framing, not current force levels.]

12. Kyiv Post, 'Putin Builds 'New Russia' in Occupied Ukraine, Tightening Grip on Seized Land', March 2026, drawing on Reuters reporting and Russian state procurement tender data. [HIGH — procurement figures are traceable to public tender records.]

13. Kyiv Post, *ibid.*, citing satellite imagery analysis and vessel-tracking data. [MEDIUM/HIGH — satellite and AIS-derived, though the specific vessel count is a single-source figure.]

14. Kyiv Independent, 'Russia Has Illegally Shipped Nearly 90,000 Tons of Wheat Through Occupied Mariupol Port in 2026', citing Ukrainian Deputy Economy Minister Taras Vysotskyi (DW interview, 19 May 2026). [MEDIUM — Ukrainian official estimate, no independent Russian corroboration expected.]

15. Kyiv Independent, *ibid.*, citing Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha and an OCCRP/Slidstvo.Info investigation on the Erisler trading route to the UN World Food Programme. [MEDIUM for export tonnage (Ukrainian government figure); HIGH for the OCCRP supply-chain finding, which is independently investigated.]

16. Kyiv Independent, *ibid.* [MEDIUM — Ukrainian government figure for calendar year 2026 to date of publication.]

17. The New Voice of Ukraine, 'Putin's Mariupol: Russian Settlers, Water Crisis and Ruins After Four Years of Occupation', May 2026. [MEDIUM — sourced to residents and Ukrainian commentators inside a closed occupation zone; independent verification is inherently difficult.]

18. Kyiv Post, 'Putin Builds 'New Russia'...', citing a Reuters investigation into Russian federal budget allocations 2024–2026. [HIGH — budget comparison sourced to Reuters' own analysis of Russian federal spending data.]

19. Kyiv Post, *ibid.* (Novorossiia Railways, Azov Ring); Euromaidan Press, 'Russia to Connect Occupied Mariupol and Donetsk via Railway to Encourage "Tourism"', February 2026, citing the exiled Mariupol City Council and the Center for the Study of Occupation. [MEDIUM — Euromaidan Press is a Ukrainian advocacy-adjacent outlet; the military-logistics interpretation is the City Council's assessment, not confirmed Russian intent.]

20. Kyiv Post, *ibid.*, citing Putin's 'reunification anniversary' address as reported via Sputnik pool footage. [HIGH — direct quotation from an official address.]

21. Euromaidan Press, *ibid.*, citing a Bumaga Media investigation. [MEDIUM — independent Russian-language investigative outlet; figures not independently re-verified by this author.]

22. The New Voice of Ukraine, *ibid.* [MEDIUM — sourced to residents inside the occupation zone.]
23. The New Voice of Ukraine, *ibid.*, citing the Kremlin's 'Integration-2025' forum for the five-million resettlement figure. [LOW/MEDIUM — the resettlement figure is reported secondhand and should be treated as indicative of Russian planning ambition rather than a confirmed target.]
24. The New Voice of Ukraine, *ibid.*, drawing the Grozny comparison via Ukrainian experts and officials. [MEDIUM — analytical framing rather than a claim of documented fact.]
25. Kyiv Post, 'Ukraine Strikes Occupied Mariupol Port, Knocking Out Russian Logistics Hub', June 2026, citing the Ukrainian National Guard's 1st Azov Corps and Ukraine's General Staff on the 5 and 10 June strikes on fuel storage and port power supply. [HIGH — corroborated by the acknowledging party (1st Azov Corps) as well as Ukrainian military sources.]
26. Naval News, 'Ukrainian Drone Raid Hits 10 Russian Ships, Crippling Crimea Supply Lines', July 2026, on the Kairos Battalion, 414th Unmanned Strike Aviation Brigade ('Magyar's Birds'), operating under Ukraine's Unmanned Systems Forces command. [HIGH for unit identification; MEDIUM for the wider claim that the Russian Navy 'can no longer function without near certainty of receiving a strike', which is the outlet's own analytical framing.]
27. The War Zone (TWZ), 'Ukraine Claims Scores Of Russian Ships Struck In Sea Of Azov', July 2026, citing Fire Point co-owner Denis Shtilerman on the FP-2's 200kg warhead and 370km range, and analyst Roy Gardiner on satellite-linked man-in-the-loop guidance. These are one-way attack drones, not loitering munitions — they are launched against a designated target rather than searching an area before striking. [MEDIUM — manufacturer-sourced specification claims, not independently verified; strike geography corroborated across multiple outlets.]
28. Robert 'Madyar' Brovdi (commander, Unmanned Systems Forces of Ukraine), Telegram statements 7–11 July 2026, reporting escalating nightly tallies rising from 8 vessels struck on 6–7 July to 73 successful strikes against 28 vessels on the night of 10–11 July; cross-referenced against Wikipedia, 'Ukrainian Attacks on the Russian Shadow Fleet', which places the cumulative Azov total at 42 of roughly 50 tankers struck 6–10 July. [MEDIUM — Kyiv Independent and other outlets carrying these figures explicitly note they cannot independently verify Brovdi's claims; treat as a Ukrainian command-authored tally, directionally credible, precise numbers unconfirmed.]
29. Kyiv Independent, 'Russia Halts Shipping Through Don-Azov Canal After Ukrainian Strike on Vessels, Reuters Reports', July 2026, citing three sources in Russia's grain export industry and Reuters reporting that Russian border guards stopped accepting Kerch Strait transit applications from 6:10pm local time on 10 July 2026, with no restoration date given; market analysts cited estimate up to a quarter of Russia's wheat exports transit the Sea of Azov. [HIGH — Reuters-sourced with named industry contacts, though the duration of the suspension was unconfirmed at time of writing.]
30. Robin Ashby, Black Sea Fleet Part One and Part Two, Defence Viewpoints / Substack, June 2026. [Self-reference.]