The Black Sea Fleet - From Regional Power to Constrained Force

Part One: The Fleet, the War, and the Attrition Campaign

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The Inheritance of Sevastopol

Russia's Black Sea Fleet entered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 at the height of its post-Soviet capability. Sevastopol — seized, along with the rest of Crimea, in 2014 — had been transformed in eight years from a leased base operating on borrowed time into a heavily fortified naval complex. New submarines had been commissioned. New corvettes carrying Kalibr cruise missiles had replaced ageing Soviet hulls. Coastal defence batteries covered the approaches. The fleet's air component had been reinforced. By almost any measure, the Black Sea Fleet in early 2022 was the most capable it had been since the Soviet Union's dissolution.
It was also, as events proved, profoundly vulnerable to a form of warfare its commanders had not adequately anticipated.

By mid-2026, approximately thirty percent of the fleet's pre-war combat strength had been destroyed or seriously damaged. The flagship was at the bottom of the Black Sea. The principal base at Sevastopol had been progressively abandoned as a forward operating hub. Several of the Improved Kilo-class submarines — the fleet's most strategically important assets — had been struck at their moorings or degraded by technical failure. The surviving surface fleet had retreated east to Novorossiysk, a port significantly inferior to Sevastopol for maintenance and sustainment. Freedom of manoeuvre across the western and central Black Sea had been

effectively forfeited.
None of this was achieved by another conventional navy. Ukraine had almost no surface warships when the war began. Its submarine force was non-existent. What Ukraine possessed instead was ingenuity, long-range missile capability, and an accelerating programme of unmanned maritime systems that the Russian fleet proved unable to defeat.
The Black Sea has become the primary laboratory of modern naval drone warfare. That fact alone makes the fleet's experience significant beyond the immediate conflict.

Strategic Setting
The Black Sea is a constrained maritime environment. Roughly 1,175 kilometres from east to west and 610 kilometres at its widest from north to south, it connects to the Mediterranean only through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits — Turkish sovereign territory — and thence through the Aegean. The Montreux Convention of 1936 governs military transit through the straits, limiting warships of non-littoral powers and, under Article 19, restricting transit by belligerent states in time of war.
Russia had moved to pre-position additional vessels before any closure. Northern Fleet landing ships — Olenegorsky Gornyak, Georgiy Pobedonosets and Pyotr Morgunov — had been observed departing Kaliningrad in January 2022, heavily laden, making for the Black Sea. As small vessels below the Montreux displacement threshold, they transited legitimately. Along with Baltic Fleet units, they reinforced the Black Sea Fleet's amphibious arm well before the straits closed. At least six Russian warships and a submarine had crossed the Turkish straits in February before Turkey acted.
On 27 February, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu announced that his government would formally recognise the invasion as a war — the legal trigger for invoking Article 19 of the Montreux Convention. The practical consequence was immediate and, for Russia, irremediable: no further reinforcement of the Black Sea Fleet by major warships was possible for the duration. Three vessels including the Marshal Ustinov were refused entry as they had no registered Black Sea base. What was already inside the Black Sea was all there would be.
Moscow had anticipated this and attempted a strategic workaround. The Marshal Ustinov — a Slava-class guided missile cruiser detached from the Northern Fleet — had entered the Mediterranean via Gibraltar in early February with a destroyer escort. The Varyag, the Pacific Fleet's own Slava-class cruiser, was also deployed to the eastern Mediterranean in the same period. Russia thus had two of its three remaining Slava-class cruisers on station in the eastern Mediterranean, carrying substantial anti-ship missile loads that provided a counter to the two US carriers in those waters.
Neither achieved anything of consequence. The Marshal Ustinov was reported south of Cyprus in early June, having cruised the eastern Mediterranean for four months. She had attempted to dock at Tartus in Syria and turned away a few miles short — apparently unable to berth, whether for reasons of draught, infrastructure, or political calculation remains unclear. The Varyag similarly accomplished nothing of strategic note. Both eventually withdrew. The Marshal Ustinov returned to Severomorsk on 15 September 2022 after 236 days at sea and 36,000 nautical miles travelled — most of it going nowhere in particular. The Moskva, meanwhile, had gone to the bottom in April. All three Slava-class cruisers had thus been simultaneously rendered useless: one sunk, two stranded on a fruitless Mediterranean cruise they could not

convert into reinforcement. It was not an auspicious beginning.
The fleet's pre-war strategic purpose encompassed five principal functions. Defence of Russia's southern maritime approaches and Crimea. Long-range precision strike against Ukraine using Kalibr cruise missiles launched from both surface units and submarines. Support for Russian operations in the eastern Mediterranean when passage was available, including the logistics corridor to Russia's naval facility at Tartus in Syria — now lost following the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024. Maintenance of political and military influence across the wider Black Sea region. And the potential to project amphibious power against Ukraine's southern and southwestern coastline.
Of these five functions, the amphibious mission was frustrated almost immediately, long-range strike has been progressively degraded, the Mediterranean corridor has been severed, and coastal influence has contracted eastward. What remains is the defensive mission, and the Kalibr strike capability maintained by the surviving submarine force.

The Fleet in 2022: Starting Strength
At the commencement of full-scale operations, the Black Sea Fleet comprised approximately 74 vessels of varying types. The flagship was the Slava-class guided missile cruiser Moskva, a 12,500-tonne vessel providing long-range air defence coverage and anti-ship capability for the entire surface action group. The cruiser was the largest and most capable ship in the fleet and its loss proved qualitatively as well as symbolically significant: it was the only vessel in the Black Sea able to provide fleet-wide air defence against missile attack at extended range.
Submarine Force [HIGH]: Six Project 636.3 Improved Kilo-class diesel-electric submarines, capable of launching Kalibr cruise missiles through standard torpedo tubes. These were the fleet's most potent and, as events demonstrated, its most survivable element. Their low acoustic signature — earning the NATO nickname 'Black Hole' — and ability to launch from submerged positions made them considerably harder to target than surface vessels. Individual hulls: Novorossiysk (B-261), Rostov-na-Donu (B-237), Stary Oskol (B-262), Krasnodar (B-265), Veliky Novgorod (B-268), Kolpino (B-271). One additional older Project 877 Kilo (B-380 Svyatoy Knyaz Georgiy) was also assigned.
Major Surface Combatants [HIGH]: Admiral Grigorovich-class frigates — Admiral Grigorovich, Admiral Essen, Admiral Makarov — each carrying Kalibr launch cells and Shtil-1 air defence systems. Buyan-M class missile corvettes (Project 21631): Serpukhov, Zeleny Dol — small but Kalibr-capable. Karakurt-class corvettes (Project 22800): Askold, Tsiklon, Amur — newer hulls with improved missile payload. Various patrol and mine countermeasure vessels.
Amphibious Force [HIGH]: Multiple Ropucha-class large landing ships including Saratov, Novocherkassk, Caesar Kunikov, Orsk, Kostiantyn Olshansky (seized Ukrainian vessel), and Alligator-class vessels. This was one of the most capable amphibious forces in Russian service and a central element of the campaign plan for southern Ukraine.
Naval Aviation [HIGH]: Su-30SM multi-role fighters, Be-12 maritime patrol aircraft, Ka-27 and Ka-29 helicopters, with Ka-52 attack helicopter detachments available. The principal aviation hub was Saky airbase in Crimea.
Coastal Defence [HIGH]: Bastion-P systems (Oniks P-800 anti-ship missiles, range 140–600 km depending on flight profile), Bal coastal defence systems, S-400 integrated air defence, and extensive electronic warfare coverage. These shore-based assets were always the backbone of

Black Sea denial capability and have proved more resilient than the surface fleet.

The Campaign Against the Fleet: A Chronology

Phase One: 2022 — The Opening Shocks

The first major losses came quickly. On 25 March 2022, the large landing ship Saratov was destroyed at its berth in occupied Berdiansk by a Ukrainian Tochka-U ballistic missile — an early demonstration that ground-based systems could reach naval targets in port. Two sister ships, Novocherkassk and Caesar Kunikov, were also damaged in the same strike.

The defining event of the war's opening phase was the sinking of the Moskva on 14 April 2022. Hit by two Ukrainian-built R-360 Neptune anti-ship cruise missiles off Snake Island, the flagship burned through the night and sank the following day. Russia claimed a fire of unknown origin and denied the Neptune strikes; Western intelligence and Ukrainian military sources confirmed them. The loss removed the fleet's only long-range air defence umbrella and fundamentally altered the surface action group's freedom of manoeuvre. Every subsequent Russian surface operation in the western Black Sea had to account for the absence of the Moskva's protective coverage.

Ukrainian naval drone strikes began in October 2022, when a coordinated attack on Sevastopol Bay using improvised surface drones struck the minesweeper Ivan Golubets and damaged the frigate Admiral Makarov — which had by then become the de facto flagship. The attack demonstrated that Sevastopol's harbour was no longer a sanctuary. Within days, satellite imagery confirmed Russian ships beginning to disperse.

In August 2022, Ukrainian strikes on Saky airbase in Crimea destroyed more than half the Black Sea Fleet's combat aircraft in a single operation — a loss from which the fleet's air component never fully recovered.

Phase Two: 2023–2024 — The Drone Acceleration

Ukrainian maritime drone capability grew rapidly through 2023. The Magura V5 unmanned surface vessel — developed by the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate under the Group 13 special unit — became the platform that rewrote the rules of Black Sea naval warfare.

The Magura V5 is an 18-foot carbon-fibre hull displacing 1.1 tonnes when fully loaded, powered by waterjet propulsion, with a range exceeding 400 nautical miles and burst speeds reportedly up to 54 knots. Unit cost has been estimated at between $250,000 and $300,000 — a fraction of the value of the vessels it has targeted. In February 2024, six Magura V5s operating in coordinated attack mode sank the Tarantul-class missile corvette Ivanovets in Donuzlav Bay: the first time in recorded military history that a naval drone sank an enemy warship in active combat. Two weeks later, the same system sank the Ropucha-class landing ship Caesar Kunikov. The missile patrol boat Sergei Kotov followed in March 2024. Three major warships in five weeks.

The string of losses prompted the Russian Defence Ministry to dismiss Black Sea Fleet Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov in February 2024 — itself a tacit acknowledgement of institutional failure.

Ukrainian innovation did not stop with ship-killing. In May 2024, Magura V5s were adapted to carry repurposed R-73 air-to-air missiles — what the Ukrainian side termed 'FrankenSAM' — and began engaging Russian anti-drone helicopters. On 31 December 2024, a Magura V5 shot down a Russian Mi-8 helicopter: the first time a naval surface drone had destroyed an aircraft.

By May 2025, the upgraded Magura V7 variant, carrying AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles, shot down two Russian Su-30SM fighters on separate occasions over the Black Sea — fixed-wing combat aircraft worth tens of millions of dollars each, destroyed by sub-$1 million drone platforms launched from sea.

The Sub Sea Baby underwater drone added a further dimension in December 2025. In what Ukrainian sources described as the world's first successful combat strike by an unmanned underwater vehicle against a submarine, the Kilo-class boat Kolpino (B-271) was struck at its berth in Novorossiysk — demonstrating that even the fleet's most survivable assets were no longer safe at anchor.

Phase Three: 2025–2026 — The Retreat to Novorossiysk

By 2023, significant elements of the fleet had begun displacing eastward from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk. The process accelerated through 2024 and into 2025 as Ukrainian long-range missile capability extended its reach. By mid-2025, Sevastopol had been effectively abandoned as a primary operating base for major surface units.

Novorossiysk presented its own problems. The port is substantially inferior to Sevastopol for naval operations. It lacks comparable dry-dock and repair facilities. It is exposed to worse sea conditions. And, as events demonstrated, it was not beyond Ukrainian reach. On 2 March 2026, a large-scale Ukrainian drone strike on Novorossiysk sank the minesweeper Valentin Pikul and inflicted heavy damage on the ASW ships Yeysk and Kasimov. An April 2026 combined strike on the same base critically damaged the frigate Admiral Makarov's superstructure and Kalibr missile launchers — removing the ship that had been serving as the de facto fleet flagship since the Moskva sinking.

Russia also lost its Mediterranean logistics base. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 led to Russia's eviction from Tartus, ending a presence sustained through the Black Sea Fleet's transit capability. The Kilo-class submarine Novorossiysk (B-261) was among the first vessels to depart, passing through Gibraltar in January 2025 and subsequently encountering a major fuel system failure in the Mediterranean — surfacing, compromised, under NATO observation. The incident illustrated both the operational and mechanical stress on assets that had been operating far from adequate support infrastructure.

Order of Battle: The Fleet as It Stands

The following assessment is current to June 2026. The picture remains dynamic. Ukrainian sources, OSINT tracking, and Western intelligence assessments are the primary data sources; Russian official statements are unreliable on damage and losses and have been discounted accordingly.

Submarines

Project 636.3 Improved Kilo-class [MEDIUM, status varies by hull]:

• B-261 Novorossiysk — suffered a major fuel-system failure in the Mediterranean in September 2025, surfacing under NATO observation near Gibraltar. Was transiting back toward the Baltic as of late 2025. Availability in the Black Sea theatre is unlikely in the short term.

• B-237 Rostov-na-Donu — was struck in dry dock at the Sevastopol Marine Plant in September

2023. Was reported restored to floating condition by June 2024 but operational status remains uncertain and capability is assessed as degraded. [LOW]
• B-262 Stary Oskol — has sustained no confirmed damage and is assessed as operational. [MEDIUM]
• B-265 Krasnodar — has been operating in the Baltic and Mediterranean theatre since 2025 following Black Sea Fleet dispersal and is not available for Black Sea operations. [MEDIUM]
• B-268 Veliky Novgorod — has sustained no confirmed damage and is assessed as operational or in a normal maintenance cycle. [MEDIUM]
• B-271 Kolpino — was struck at her Novorossiysk berth by a Ukrainian Sub Sea Baby UUV in December 2025. Damage is assessed as significant; Russian denials are contradicted by visual and satellite evidence. Operational status is uncertain. [ASSESSED]
• B-380 Svyatoy Knyaz Georgiy (Project 877 Kilo) — is a legacy hull assessed as available for training or supplementary patrol duties. Offensive capability is limited. [LOW]

The Improved Kilo force has been reduced from six fully operational hulls to an effective operational strength that is difficult to assess precisely but is substantially degraded. Of the original six Project 636.3 boats, one is geographically unavailable, one is confirmed damaged and of uncertain status, and a third has been seriously struck. The submarine force remains the fleet's most important strategic asset and retains genuine Kalibr strike capability — but it is under sustained pressure from Ukrainian underwater drone operations at the one base it uses regularly.

Surface Combatants
Frigates — Admiral Grigorovich-class (Project 11356R) [HIGH/MEDIUM]:
• Admiral Grigorovich — is assessed as operational at Novorossiysk.
• Admiral Essen — is assessed as operational at Novorossiysk.
• Admiral Makarov — sustained critical damage to her superstructure and Kalibr launcher systems in the April 2026 strike on Novorossiysk and is assessed as non-operational. She was the fleet's most capable remaining surface unit. [HIGH]

Corvettes — Buyan-M class (Project 21631) [MEDIUM]:
• Serpukhov and Zeleny Dol — are both assessed as operational and Kalibr-capable, and now represent the primary surface Kalibr launch platforms remaining to the fleet.

Corvettes — Karakurt-class (Project 22800) [MEDIUM]:
• Askold, Tsiklon, Amur — are newer hulls with at least two assessed as operational; one or more may have been transferred from the Baltic Fleet.

Amphibious Force [HIGH — losses confirmed]:
• Saratov — was sunk at Berdiansk on 25 March 2022.
• Caesar Kunikov — was sunk by Magura V5 USVs in February 2024.
• Novocherkassk — was sunk at Feodosia in December 2023.
• Kostiantyn Olshansky — was sunk at Sevastopol in March 2024.
• Orsk — was damaged and partially destroyed at Berdiansk in 2022.
• Minsk and Rostov-na-Donu (Northern Fleet landing ships deployed to the Black Sea) — were both confirmed sunk or destroyed at Sevastopol.
The amphibious capability of the fleet has been functionally eliminated as an offensive instrument. Remaining landing craft capacity is assessed as insufficient for any significant amphibious operation against defended coastline.

Naval Aviation
The August 2022 strikes on Saky airbase destroyed more than half the fleet's combat aircraft. Remaining assets have been dispersed and partially integrated with Russian Aerospace Forces units in Crimea. Su-30SM fighters and Ka-27 and Ka-29 helicopter detachments remain active; helicopter anti-drone patrols over Novorossiysk are a significant part of current tasking. The air component is substantially below pre-war strength and cannot provide adequate cover for major surface operations. [MEDIUM]

Naval Infantry
The Black Sea Fleet's ground combat component is the 810th Separate Guards Naval Infantry Brigade, based at Kazachya Bay, Sevastopol, with a battalion detachment at Temryuk. The Guards title, accompanied by the Orders of Zhukov and Ushakov, reflects honours earned across the Second Chechen War and the Syrian intervention — a formation with genuine combat pedigree and a reputation, before 2022, as one of Russia's more capable marine units. That reputation has been comprehensively destroyed. The 810th was committed to the assault on Mariupol from the opening of the full-scale invasion, losing its commanding officer Colonel Alexei Sharov killed in action on 22 March 2022. By April 2022, the Ukrainian General Staff assessed 158 dead and approximately 500 wounded. By July, GUR Deputy Chief Skibitskyi reported that 200 servicemen had refused to return to combat. By September 2022 the brigade had reportedly lost over 85 percent of its personnel in the Kherson direction. Ukrainian intelligence chief Budanov declared it 'completely defeated' in September 2023 following the Zaporizhia counteroffensive; Russian airborne units replaced it at the front line. [ASSESSED — Ukrainian sources; broadly corroborated by ISW and open-source tracking]
The brigade was subsequently reconstituted — reportedly multiple times — and redeployed to the Kursk Oblast in 2024. The Ukrainian 'I Want to Live' project identified over 2,000 confirmed dead from the 810th across the full war. In June 2025 elements were overrun in the Sumy region with ten marines captured, Ukrainian forces noting pointedly that the brigade's elite reputation 'has been shattered.' The commander responsible for the Kursk period, Oleg Vlasov,

was reportedly the subject of internal fratricide incidents — officers killed by their own men — before being eliminated at his command post in December 2024.
The 810th still exists on the order of battle. As a coherent, experienced fighting formation it does not. Reconstitution to anything approaching its pre-war capability will take years and requires a pool of experienced NCOs and junior officers that Russia has largely expended. The degradation of the fleet's ground combat component mirrors precisely what has happened to the Northern and Pacific Fleet naval infantry brigades — a pattern examined in detail elsewhere in this series. [See 'The Bear's Broken Paw', Defence Viewpoints, March 2026; 'From Expectation to Exhaustion', Defence Viewpoints / Academia.edu, 2023; Pacific Fleet Additional Notes: Naval Infantry, Defence Viewpoints, April 2026]
The Bastion-P and Bal coastal missile systems, together with S-400 air defence batteries and electronic warfare units, represent the element of the fleet's combined-arms posture least affected by Ukrainian strike operations. These systems have not been significantly degraded and continue to provide genuine anti-access capability in the northern Black Sea. They are the backbone of what remains of Russian sea-denial in the theatre. [HIGH]

Summary Assessment: Part One
The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence assesses that approximately thirty percent of the Black Sea Fleet's pre-war combat strength has been destroyed or seriously damaged. The United Kingdom Ministry of Defence had characterised the fleet as 'functionally inactive' in its surface strike role as early as March 2024. The picture by mid-2026 is considerably worse than those assessments captured.
The fleet that fought into the Black Sea in February 2022 — with a flagship cruiser, six operational Kilo submarines, a substantial amphibious force, and freedom of manoeuvre across most of the Black Sea — no longer exists in that form. What remains is a compressed, predominantly defensive force operating from a secondary base under persistent Ukrainian attack, with a submarine arm under growing pressure and a surface fleet that has lost its most capable unit.
Russia has not been defeated by another navy. It has been progressively disabled by a combination of long-range missile strikes, unmanned surface vessels costing a fraction of their targets, and latterly unmanned underwater vehicles capable of reaching submarines at their moorings. Each innovation arrived faster than Russian countermeasures. The pace of that attrition shows no signs of slowing.
Part Two will examine what this means: for the doctrine and future of the fleet, for the implications of Black Sea drone warfare, for the Russo-Japanese parallel, and for what the mines left behind will cost everyone.

Appendix: Principal Confirmed Losses 2022–2026
Vessel | Type | Date | Method
Moskva — Slava-class cruiser (flagship) | 14 Apr 2022 | Neptune anti-ship missiles [HIGH]
Saratov — Ropucha-class LLS | 25 Mar 2022 | Tochka-U ballistic missile, Berdiansk [HIGH]
Orsk — Ropucha-class LLS | Mar 2022 | Missile strike, Berdiansk [HIGH]

Saky air component — ~20+ combat aircraft | Aug 2022 | Long-range missile strike [HIGH]
Ivan Golubets — Project 266M minesweeper | Oct 2022 | Naval drone strike, Sevastopol Bay [HIGH]
Novocherkassk — Ropucha-class LLS | Dec 2023 | Missile strike, Feodosia [HIGH]
Ivanovets — Tarantul-class corvette | Feb 2024 | Magura V5 USVs, Donuzlav Bay [HIGH]
Caesar Kunikov — Ropucha-class LLS | Feb 2024 | Magura V5 USVs [HIGH]
Sergei Kotov — Patrol vessel | Mar 2024 | Magura V5 USVs [HIGH]
Kostiantyn Olshansky — Ropucha-class LLS | Mar 2024 | Missile strike, Sevastopol [HIGH]
Rostov-na-Donu (B-237) — Project 636.3 Kilo sub | Sep 2023 | Missile strike, Sevastopol dry dock [HIGH]
Kolpino (B-271) — Project 636.3 Kilo sub | Dec 2025 | Sub Sea Baby UUV, Novorossiysk [ASSESSED]
Valentin Pikul — Minesweeper | Mar 2026 | Drone strike, Novorossiysk [HIGH]
Admiral Makarov — Admiral Grigorovich-class frigate | Apr 2026 | Combined strike, Novorossiysk — critically damaged [HIGH]

Note on Sources
Ukrainian Ministry of Defence loss assessments (mod.gov.ua, April 2026). UK Ministry of Defence daily intelligence updates, 2022–2026. USNI Proceedings, 'Ukraine's Magura Naval Drones: Black Sea Equalizers', September 2025. Naval News, 'Russia's Submarine Problem Is Much Worse Than Many Imagine', October 2025. Wikipedia Black Sea Fleet article (open-source tracking, April 2026). Defence.info analysis of the Sub Sea Baby UUV strike, December 2025. Army Recognition (various, 2024–2026). Oryx open-source loss tracking. All loss assessments have been cross-referenced against at least two independent sources; confidence levels are assigned accordingly. Russian official statements on damage and losses have been treated with scepticism throughout and have not been used as primary sources.

Confidence levels: [HIGH] Confirmed from multiple open-source or official records. [MEDIUM] Single or fragmentary sourcing; probable but not confirmed. [LOW] Assessed from technical or contextual inference; treat with caution. [ASSESSED] Western or Ukrainian intelligence estimate, unverified.