



## Ukraine moves armour to border areas

**Tim Ripley**

London

**Bruce Jones**

London

Ukrainian armoured and airborne units have been moved into the sensitive east of the country as tension continues to rise after a controversial referendum on joining Russia took place in Crimea on 16 March.

A column of BMD-2 armoured personnel carriers and BMD-2K command post variants of the Ukrainian army's 25th Airborne Brigade was filmed by the BBC on the day of the Crimea referendum on patrol outside the flashpoint city of Donetsk near the border with Russia. The air-portable armoured vehicles are the signature equipment of the brigade, which is the only formation in Ukraine's military to operate them.

On the same day, a video appeared on social media showing a group of Ukrainian T-64 main battle tanks and BMP-2 armoured fighting vehicles on patrol outside the village of Strilecha on 15 March. This position is less than 10 km from where troops of a Russian airborne regiment are based at Veselaya Lopan, across the border. Soldiers of the Ukrainian 92nd Mechanised Brigade are based nearby in a garrison on the outskirts of Kharkiv, but the vehicles filmed near Strilecha carried no markings to identify them as being from this formation.

Unrest in Kharkiv and Donetsk has raised fears that Russian forces might intervene to 'protect' the pro-Moscow groups in Ukraine's eastern border region, prompting the Kiev government to order the call up of 20,000 National Guard volunteers on 16 March. This force is drawn predominately from supporters of the 'Euromaidan' movement, which was instrumental in the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich on 21 February.

The latest deployments follow some two weeks of growing Ukrainian troop movements as the country's military command responds to the Russian occupation of Crimea and tension along Ukraine's eastern border. On 2 March, the Kiev government order the mobilisation of military reservists and the activation of defensive measures.

Across the Ukraine, a steady stream of military deployments and training exercises has been under way. This appears primarily to increase the combat readiness of Ukrainian conscripts after the country's defence minister revealed that only 6,000 of the country's 63,000 ground forces could be considered "combat ready". This also has the added benefit of confusing Russian intelligence and keeping troops out of barracks to prevent them being blockaded inside by Russian forces and pro-Moscow civilians, as happened in the opening hours of the Russian intervention in the Crimea on 27/28 February, should the Kremlin order a surprise incursion into eastern Ukraine.

News reports and social media imagery indicates a large live firing exercise occurred at the Honcharivske training area on 14 March, involving T-64, BTR, BMP and vehicles, as well as 9K22 Tunguska anti-aircraft systems of the 1st Armoured Brigade, in the presence of the Ukrainian acting President Oleksander Turchinov, who was seen wearing combat fatigues. A battery of eight BM-27 Uragan (9P140) multiple launch rocket launchers carried out a road move in southeastern Ukraine and a unit of S-300 surface-to-air-missiles was also identified carrying out a night time exercise near Kremenchuk in central Ukraine.

