



AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF UKRAINIAN ORGANISATIONS
СОЮЗ УКРАЇНСЬКИХ ОРГАНІЗАЦІЙ АВСТРАЛІЇ

Representing 22 Peak Ukrainian Organisations in Australia
Member of Ukrainian World Congress

The Hon Shayne Neumann MP
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via Email: jscfadt@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr Neumann,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's *Inquiry into the Department of Defence Annual Report 2022–23*.

The Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO) represents the interests of the Ukrainian community in Australia. We are the peak body for more than 20 community organisations across the country, with interests from culture, business, youth, religion and women's issues. We lead Australia's largest community-run fundraising effort for non-lethal military aid for Ukraine, which has raised over \$1 million to date. Since 2015, we have managed the Ukraine Crisis Appeal in partnership with Rotary Australia World Community Service and Caritas Ukraine, which has raised almost \$10 million for emergency and humanitarian aid for Ukrainians impacted by Russia's invasion, be they in Ukraine or temporarily rebuilding their lives and livelihoods in Australia. We also run Future Ukraine, a DGR-registered charity which has raised over \$5.5 million to date and contributes to targeted projects in the fields of rehabilitation, reconstruction, leadership and public information.

Given the focus of our work, we are deeply interested in the military assistance provided by the Australian Government to Ukraine, which has comprised 80% of Australia's total support to date. Our submission is focused wholly on this theme of the inquiry. In making a submission, we aim to deliver a community perspective on the Australian Government's military support for Ukraine.

We trust the Committee finds our submission useful. We would be pleased to join any public hearings which are scheduled as part of the Committee's work.

Yours sincerely,

Stefan Romaniw OAM
AFUO Co-Chair

Kateryna Argyrou
AFUO Co-Chair

Background

24 February 2024 will mark the start of the third year of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. In framing the Inquiry, the Committee rightly notes that Russia's actions in 2022 constituted 'the most significant hostile act against a European country since the end of World War II'. While Russia's war against Ukraine is no longer on the Australian news every night, it is as ferocious and deadly as ever. Normal life is on pause for many Ukrainians, while for many others, their lives — once peaceful, full and happy — are now over.

Ukrainians have sustained two years of genocidal attacks, terrorism, aggression, destruction, misery, missile strikes, war crimes and abductions. Hospitals, schools, supermarkets, playgrounds and energy infrastructure continue to be bombed. Despite this, Ukrainians have not faltered in their courage, resilience and bravery. They understand they cannot live under Russia's tyrannical rule or abide Moscow's view that Ukraine should not exist. This is an existential fight for Ukraine. It is also a direct challenge to all liberal democracies that support the rule of law, and seek a global order which is not determined by force and aggression. Ukrainians have accepted this challenge and are at the frontline of pushing back against a dark and brutal authoritarianism that threatens global peace and stability.

Ukraine's perseverance and resolve has been built on the support it has received from partners around the world. The Ukrainian community is grateful for Australia's contributions to this end. We recognise that military aid is one component of Australia's support, and complements the sanctions regime, economic measures, humanitarian support and other actions Australia has undertaken over the last two years. Australia's solidarity and commitment to Ukraine is essential and appreciated, and it must be sustained and deepened.

The Annual Report on the subject of military aid to Ukraine

The *Department of Defence Annual Report 2022–23* notes that Defence 'continues to support Ukraine in defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and in doing so, continues to uphold the international rules-based order.'¹ The extent to which this is true however turns on the size and timeliness of the support given. Without meaningful, ambitious and timely support, Defence's contribution to Ukraine's defence and to the international rules-based order is similarly reduced in impact. It has never been more important to match rhetoric with action.

The *Annual Report* notes that Australia's military assistance helps to 'empower Ukraine to end Russia's illegal and immoral war on its own terms.'² The AFUO wholeheartedly agrees with the Department of Defence that Ukraine must end this war on its own terms. But that can only happen if Ukraine is properly armed and supported. We are concerned that Australia's contributions — which have become smaller and less frequent over time — are not of a size and scale as to meaningfully help to achieve this outcome. Australia was once the leading non-NATO contributor to Ukraine, but now ranks sixth after Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria and the Republic of Korea³. As recently as last week, our community received a response to correspondence from their local MP which noted Australia was the largest contributor to Ukraine outside of NATO — this hasn't been the case for a long time, so such a lack of precision and currency indicates to us a lack of understanding of the reality of Australia's support these days.⁴

If Ukraine is to end this war and secure peace 'on its own terms', it will need continued support from Australia and other partners. The Churchill quote, 'Give us the tools, and we will finish the job,' is offered for the Committee's

¹ Page 43, <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/Defence-Annual-Report-2022-23.pdf>

² Page 12, <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/Defence-Annual-Report-2022-23.pdf>

³ <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

⁴ The AFUO would be happy to supply further details to the Committee on request.

reflection. Of course, this has always been true: arming Ukraine fully and quickly may have been decisive and kept us away from a grinding war of attrition which continues to cost many Ukrainian lives each day. Coordinated and well-calibrated support continues to be needed. Even though Ukraine is ‘a long way away’, to quote Foreign Minister the Hon Penny Wong, stable and wealthy democracies such as Australia have a critical role to play in defending global security and ensuring aggression and violence do not become the new international norm. This doesn’t happen by accident. As Ukrainians, we know that freedom, peace and self-determination must sometimes come at great.

The Annual Report on the subject of the MRH-90 Taipan helicopters

We draw the Committee’s attention to page 176 of the Department of Defence Annual Report 2022–23, which speaks to the Department’s plans for the retirement of the fleet of MRH-90 Taipan helicopters.

‘In September 2023, the Government agreed to not pursue the return of the MRH-90 Taipans (MRH-90) helicopter fleet to flying operations. In 2023-24 Defence will subsequently pursue disposal options for the MRH-90 fleet. The accurate impact of this decision on Defence’s net asset holdings of \$122.5 billion is not fully known or able to be reliably measured as at 30 June 2023. The financial impact of this decision and any subsequent disposals will be reflected in the 2023-24 financial statements. The Defence net assets balance as at 30 June 2023 includes \$484.4 million relating to MRH-90 helicopters and associated spare components.’⁵

As the Committee may be aware, Ukraine expressed an interest in Australia’s Taipan helicopters through an official letter on 17 December 2023 from Lieutenant General Kyrilo Budanov, chief of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, to Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister the Hon Richard Marles MP. However, we note recent media reporting that the Department had been made aware of Ukraine’s interest as early as the middle of October, when Senator David Fawcett relayed conversations he had had with members of Ukraine’s military and politicians at a major NATO meeting in Copenhagen between 7 and 12 October 2023.⁶ On 7 February 2024, Senator Fawcett made a statement to the Senate in this regard.

While these events fall just outside of the scope of the reporting period for the Department of Defence Annual Report 2022–23, the AFUO has reason to question the timing claimed in the extract above. In conversations with our community in early February 2024, Departmental officials claimed that the disposal of the Taipans commenced 11 months earlier in January 2023⁷. This timeline is in direct conflict with the claim in the Annual Report that disposal options would be pursued in 2023-24, not to mention that it is nine months before the Minister took the decision to sign off on the Department’s advice that the Taipans should not return to flying operations.

In the same conversation, Defence officials noted that the Government’s ‘decision to replace our 47 MRH-90 Taipan helicopters with Black Hawks...was driven by the underperformance of that platform in Australia.’ Defence officials reflected that ‘the MRH-90 is a safe helicopter’ but also ‘unreliable, unaffordable, and very intensive to maintain.’ This is in direct conflict with statements from the Hon Minister Richard Marles MP in September 2023 noting that ‘the government’s highest priority is the safety and wellbeing of our people’⁸ and later by Minister for Defence Industry the Hon Pat Conroy MP who hinted at safety concerns with the Taipans in a media interview⁹. The decision to ground the Taipans and undertake an investigation arose from the Jervis Bay incident on 7 April 2023 and the Lindeman Island crash 29 July 2023. While safety concerns were used as a public rationale for why the Taipans were grounded and

⁵ Page 176, <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/Defence-Annual-Report-2022-23.pdf>

⁶ <https://asiapacificdefencereporter.com/australian-government-was-informed-of-ukraines-interest-in-taipan-during-october/>

⁷ The AFUO would be happy to supply further details to the Committee on request.

⁸ <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2023-09-29/taipans-withdrawn-service>

⁹ <https://ministers.dfat.gov.au/minister/pat-conroy/transcript/press-conference-canberra>

thus inappropriate for Ukraine, such concerns were not shared by Defence officials charged with briefing the AFUO on the Taipans decision in February 2024. Indeed, this view was made clear by the CEO of NATO Helicopter Industries in October 2023.¹⁰

If the Taipans decision was taken on safety grounds in September 2023 given the two incidents in April and July, there simply would not have been a rationale to commence disposal in January 2023. As such, the reference to the Taipan helicopters in the *Annual Report* appears incomplete and incorrect, and as such is germane to the Committee's Inquiry.

This raises a number of questions:

1. Can the Department confirm that the 'disposal strategy' for the Taipans commenced in January 2023? If so, why does the Annual Report not reflect this timeline?
2. What did the 'disposal strategy' comprise of, and what phases were undertaken when?
3. When did the Minister sign off on the disposal strategy: prior to its commencement in January 2023 or September 2023?
4. How long and with what degree of rigor did the Department search for an international buyer for the Taipan fleet?
5. Why didn't the Department wait for the findings of the Lindeman Island air crash investigation (due in September 2024) before moving to destroy these helicopters? Why was the Department happy to hold onto them while the investigations took place in the event a buyer had been found, as has been reported?
6. What analysis did the Department undertake in 2022-23 to show that disposal of the Taipans was the 'best value for money', as later claimed by Minister for Defence Industry the Hon Pat Conroy MP? Did this analysis consider the value to the Australian taxpayer of Ukraine purchasing the Taipan helicopter fleet?
7. What consideration did the Department give to Ukraine's needs when retiring the Taipan helicopters? If so, how were factors like risk, safety, battlefield impact, cost, and national interest weighed in this exercise?
8. Was Kyiv proactively consulted, directly or through other channels, in an effort to test its interest in the Taipan fleet before the disposal strategy commenced in January 2023?
9. What mechanisms does the Department have in place to systematically and proactively consider opportunities to support Ukraine and to seek views from the Government of Ukraine on its capability needs?

On the understanding that the disposal of the Taipans commenced in January 2023 as relayed by Defence officials, rather than in September 2023 as claimed in the *Annual Report*, the answers to the questions above go to the heart of good government, evidence-based public policy and accountable decision-making, not to mention integrity and transparency.

Looking to the future of Australian support for Ukraine

The Taipans decision was a huge missed opportunity for both Australia and Ukraine. Donating the Taipans would have doubled the value of Australia's total support for Ukraine overnight, given their reported value of \$900 million. With 45 Taipan helicopters, Australia could have come close to replacing the number of Ukrainian helicopters which are reported to have been lost in operations since the start of the full-scale invasion. Australia could have bolstered Ukraine's medevac capability to help provide wounded soldiers with medical attention in the crucial 'golden hour', which dramatically improves their chances of survival.

¹⁰ <https://asiapacificdefencereporter.com/no-minister-taipan-helicopters-are-extremely-safe/>

Recommendation: An official independent inquiry should be conducted into the Taipans episode to understand how, why and when key decisions were made and by whom, with particular reference to how Ukraine's needs were considered and whether the disposal strategy actually started in January or September 2023.

Ukraine continues to have significant military needs, from offensive capabilities through to defensive and protective technologies. Meeting those needs will not be easy or cheap for any partners, including Australia. But consultation with Ukraine is key, as is thinking proactively and creatively about how Defence can help meet Ukraine's needs.

While Australia's contributions to Operation KUDU are valuable and should be sustained, Ukraine desperately needs platforms and munitions that help to defend and protect. These include platforms like the Bushmasters, which have saved Ukrainian lives; the Hawkeis, which have immense battlefield utility and could be supplied with ease; or soon-to-be-retired ADF materiel, such as ASLAVs or Tiger helicopters, which are set to be replaced in the coming years.

We fear that the Taipans decision hints at the Department's reduced appetite for providing military aid to Ukraine and its limited ability to anticipate opportunities to provide suitable support to Ukraine. The AFUO appreciates that the current Budget priorities mean that any further military contributions to Ukraine will come from the Department's existing budget and inventory on hand. Given our community's experience with the Taipans, we are gravely concerned that such contributions will not be forthcoming in the meaningful amounts which are needed if Australia is to support Ukraine to end Russia's war 'on its own terms'. While such a dynamic serves the Department's interests, it would appear to our community to be short-sighted and not in the national interest.

Recommendation: Defence should review the utility and rigor of its engagement with Ukraine's representatives, be they military, diplomatic or community, to ensure the Department understands their views and needs and can proactively and creatively evaluate opportunities to support Ukraine against Russia's illegal and immoral war.

Recommendation: Defence should strengthen processes by putting a 'Ukraine lens' on all Departmental actions to ensure all opportunities are taken to support Ukraine in line with Australia's national interests. One place to start is a review of all capabilities with an eye to understanding which are unused, no longer fit for purpose, soon to be retired, gifted or on-sold, and which may be of use to Ukraine.

Australia's military aid to Ukraine, which constitutes 80% of Australia's total support, is just one element of the support Canberra has delivered to Ukraine. We note that there is not, however, a central point through which Ukraine's needs can be evaluated against Australia's capacities and prioritised for delivery. The AFUO sees a need for a Whole-of-Government channel through which to continuously evaluate humanitarian, military, diplomatic and legal opportunities for Australia to support Ukraine and Ukrainians. This would also be a channel through which private-sector contributions to Ukraine can be effectively coordinated to enhance strategic impact and complement Government contributions.

Recommendation: The Government should establish a Ukraine Support Coordination Office within the Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, with a view to improving Defence's decision making and its ability to coordinate with other agencies on the evolving suite of support Government can offer to Ukraine.

Conclusion

Russia's war against Ukraine has profound implications for the global order and strategic stability. It is squarely in Australia's interests to meaningfully help Ukraine win this fight. There is much more Australia can do, and we implore the Committee to explore our recommendations and how the references to Ukraine in the *Department of Defence*

Annual Report 2022-23 intersect with promoting Australia’s national interest and Defence’s efforts to actively uphold the international rules-based order.