

# Seafarers' Experiences From the BlackSea 2014-2022 - a Psychological Perspective

**A Look Into How Seafarers' Handled their Jobs in Areas of  
Conflict**

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## BACHELOR'S THESIS

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### Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to find out first-hand experiences from sailors that have navigated throughout the Black Sea since 2014. The Black Sea, which is steeped in historical significance, has served as an important maritime corridor between Europe and Asia. For centuries the Black Sea has witnessed numerous conflicts directly affecting sailors from merchant vessels. This thesis will outline the experiences of sailors, drawing insights directly from interviews with seafarers who have navigated these waters. These mariners who provide a key role in today's world importing and exporting cargo, now face a great risk in travelling through these waters due to geopolitical tensions. As the conflict goes on, the Black Sea is at the center of a modern struggle, especially for those who try to make a living on ships.

This thesis consists of four different parts. First I will give a history of the conflict and how it came into fruition. The second part will dive into focusing on how the conflict has affected Ukraine's shipping industry and its economy. The third part will then be transcripts of interviews I have made with three Ukrainian seafarers and their experiences. The fourth part will be a summary of my interviews from the answers I have collected, giving a broad picture.

This will be a qualitative research thesis, and I hope to capture the feelings as well as the professional aspects of dealing with a situation where seafarers need to navigate in war-ridden areas.

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Language: English

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# 1 Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war is one of the most serious and prolonged conflicts in Europe since the end of the Cold War. It has resulted in thousands of deaths, millions of displaced people, and severe economic and humanitarian consequences for both countries, Europe, and the global economy. The war has also questioned the international order and security for the relations between Russia and the West. There are many factors that contribute to the start of this war, which range from historical, political, geopolitical, economic, and cultural factors. Throughout this thesis, you will be introduced to a brief history of the conflict, followed by an account of interviews from people that have had to work in the Black Sea during these times. It is important to capture the emotions and feelings of these seafarers in highly stressful environments as they are a crucial workforce in the global economy bridging continents and cultures to the general population. As I interview them, we will notice their resilience and motivation, but also try to understand their fears.

## 1.1 Objective of the Thesis

The aim of this thesis is to examine the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on seafarers who operate in the Black Sea. The shipping industry is affected by the war both directly and indirectly, as the war has disrupted trade in the Black and Azov seas, triggered international sanctions on Russia and Belarus, caused changes in trading routes, as well as had a direct impact on the air freight sector. The objectives that I will follow more closely in this thesis are;

1. To provide an overview of the history of the Russia-Ukraine war since 2014
2. To give an insight on Ukraine's maritime economy
3. To analyze the quantitative impacts of the war on seafarers using interviews
4. To find out the challenges and outcomes that have been brought upon sailors from interviews due to the war
5. To discuss the implications and recommendations for seafarers in the face of the ongoing war

## 2 History of the Conflict

Starting from December 1991, people saw the world change in what seemed to be a matter of minutes. The USSR had officially dissolved after 70 years of existence, lowering the red flag with a hammer and sickle and raising a new one of the Russian Federation. With this collapse, 15 countries suddenly gained their independence and was able to govern themselves for the first time in decades, however, this did not come without numerous problems to be tackled. Ukraine at the time, had been the second most powerful Soviet Republic with large industrial complexes and military installations. Because of this collapse, Ukraine was left with a huge number of military equipment, including nuclear warheads. In 1994, Ukraine had agreed to give up these nuclear warheads and join the "NPT", which is a treaty that was made to prevent the spread and use of nuclear weapons. At the same time Ukraine agreed to join the NPT, they also signed the Budapest Memorandum. The Budapest Memorandum was seen as a security assurance signed by Ukraine, Russia, Great Britain, and the United States. It was an agreement by all four countries to protect and recognise the sovereignty of Ukraine and in return gave the country the protection it needed to safely give up its newly acquired nuclear arms. (Britannica, 2024) (Budjeryn, 2018) (Conquest, 2024)

In 2010, Viktor Yanukovich gained the presidency of Ukraine. Yanukovich also ran in the 2004 presidential elections, and although at first prevailing, was subjected to a large amount of controversy as the 2004 election was overrun with corruption. The country was at a standstill, and parliament had ordered to rerun the elections, seeing Yanukovich suffering a defeat in the end. This however did not stop him from running again in 2010. Yanukovich was seen as a candidate with strong ties to Russia, and a negative outlook on Europe and the EU. His victory in 2010 was seen as a big step in Russia's direction, as he had pledged to make closer ties with Vladimir Putin. Just a few years into his presidency, Yanukovich suddenly decided to not sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which would bring Ukraine's economy, legal and social systems closer to the EU's "values". Another key point of this agreement was to hopefully someday see Ukraine as part of the European Union. Yanukovich, in despite of the Ukrainian parliament voting in favour of this agreement, had all of a sudden cancelled signing at the last moment and instead announced he intended to join the Customs Union of Russia. At this point, most of the Ukrainian public had been outraged by this move, and sparked nationwide protests against this political decision. Opposite of the famous and peaceful Orange Revolution that took

place in 2004 due to the presidential elections, this time however, the protests were not peaceful and resulted in thousands injured as well as some hundreds dead. (Ray, 2024) (Wikipedia, 2024)

## 2.1 2014

As protests in 2014 continued due to the actions of Viktor Yanukovich, by the 22nd of February, the protestors had taken over the capital and Yanukovich fled Ukraine into Russia. Following his disappearance, parliament took a vote to impeach the president with a sweeping 328-0 vote. Yanukovich made a claim that he was overthrown by the people of Ukraine in a manner resembling the Nazi Party and claimed that he was still the acting president, and many government and political officials from Eastern Ukraine voiced their support for Yanukovich and Russia. At this point in time, Vladimir Putin had not directly intervened with the conflicts taking place in Ukraine, only that he had voiced his support for the disgraced president. This however took a turn in late February 2014, when he began to voice his intentions of "working on returning Crimea to Russia." Taking advantage of the unrest in Ukraine, Russian forces moved into Crimea and captured key checkpoints, cut off roads to mainland Ukraine and raised the Russian flag over parliament with little to no resistance. Within hours, the region of Crimea was isolated and within a month all Ukrainian troops had surrendered, making the region fully under Russia's control. (Ray, 2024) (Open Society Foundations, 2019)

In the Summer of 2014, it was clear that Ukraine was faced with a political divide that would result in the outcomes that the country had not faced before. It has been clear that Ukraine in itself has always somewhat been politically divided from the start between those who favoured more being closer to the west, and those wanting to be closer to Russia. Generally speaking, those living in the west of Ukraine are far more pro Europe and NATO, and those in the east are more pro Russia. However, despite the two different political preferences, most of the general population were still in favour of the idea that Ukraine should remain as a sovereign nation, excluding two movements. Now that the country was faced with unrest and riots, these two movements known as the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic whose main focus was to liberate the region of Donbas and join Russia as a new region called "New Russia." Putin voiced his support and was in favour of these movements, and soon began arming them with military aid. Heavy fighting began by separatists and the Ukrainian army, which lasted until mid 2015 when Ukraine

had essentially lost control over Donbas to Russia and the two People's Republics. (Open Society Foundations, 2019) (Wikipedia, 2024)

## 2.2 2022

As fighting continued in the Eastern part of Ukraine sporadically, it became clear in 2022 that Russia was after something much larger than occupying the east. On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin announced that it would be conducting a "special military operation" against Ukraine. In other words, Russia had launched a full scale invasion against the country on all fronts, including an attack on its capital Kyiv. Putin's reason and claim for the country of Ukraine was so that he could protect the rights of Russian speakers and the self recognised republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The invasion was met with strong resistance by the people of Ukraine, and Russia was quickly condemned by the international community. As air strikes and ground troops penetrated Ukraine, the president of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky announced that he would declare martial law and a general mobilisation of all male Ukrainian citizens. (Ray M. , 2024)

Russian attacks were initially launched from the northern front from Belarus toward Kyiv, the northeastern front toward the city of Kharkiv, a southern front from Crimea, and a southeastern front from Donbas. The northern front from Belarus aimed its focus on Kyiv to topple the Ukrainian government, while many predicted the invasion to only last a few days and expected Ukraine to surrender, this was not the case. After a month of fighting on the outskirts of Kyiv it was clear that the Russian army was faced with logistical issues and a not so organised army. By April the Russian offensive on the capital was treated as a failure, and the army soon backed off and redeployed their forces elsewhere. (Ray M. , 2024) (Zogg, 2022)

The southern front had seen more success than their respective northern force. Attacking from Crimea, the Russians had recaptured the North Crimean Canal on the day the invasion started. In the next few months after the conflict began again, forces attacked and captured key areas of Ukraine such as Mariupol, Kherson, and Kharkiv. (Center for Preventive Action, 2024)

### **3 Ukraine's Shipping Industry and its Economy**

Ukraine's maritime sector has went through many different changes over the past few decades. Starting from before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was known for its distinguished maritime maturity, which had a diversified economy ranging from river transportation, shipbuilding, as well as a successful oil and gas industry. However the country's journey to independence would eventually bring both challenges and opportunities to its maritime sector.

Ukraine's shipping industry and its economy are closely linked as the country has a long coastline situated on both the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Situated on the coastline are many major shipping ports such as Pivdennyi, Odessa, Mykolaiv and Chornomorsk which account for about 80% output of Ukraine's export and import. According to the World Bank, Ukraine's shipping industry has accounted for about 6% of its GDP and 12% of its total exports in 2019. However this has been severely affected by the war which escalated in 2022. (Ruta, n.d.) (OECD, 2023)

The war has disrupted trade activities in the Black and Azov seas as Russia has closed different shipping lanes, attacked vessels directly and indirectly, and arrested seafarers. This has affected the export of many of Ukraine's products, specifically grain, which are a major source of income for the country. The need for infrastructure and services related to land and maritime transportation has grown quickly as a result of the hunt for alternative trading routes for Ukraine's products.

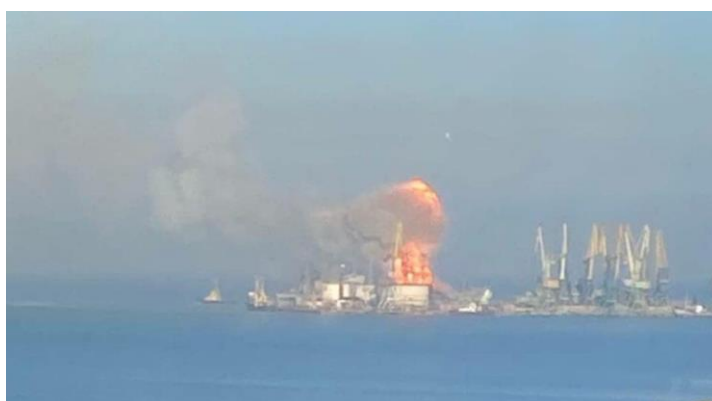
#### **3.1 Ukrainian Ports and their Role in Local and Global Trade**

Ukraine has a total of 18 seaports situated on the coasts of the Black and Azov seas. Nine of these major seaports located in the Azov Sea and all of those in Crimea are currently under Russian control. Below I have listed all of the ports and given information about them, please note that annual cargo tonnage are estimates for before the conflict, and annual cargo tonnage between the years of 2014-present fluctuate based on various factors such as sanctions and regional stability. (LCA, 2024)



Above shows a map of most of the major Ukrainian seaports in the Black and Azov Seas. Note, not all ports listed below are found in this map. (UCN Team, 2023)

1. Berdyansk – A seaport situated in the city of Berdyansk, located on the coast of the sea of Azov. The port specializes in light vehicles, fruits, sugar, metal. Annual cargo tonnage as measured in 2015 was 4.45 million tons. As of February 26, 2022 the port of Berdyansk was captured by Russian forces. This was a successful operation by the Russian army, as Berdyansk was used as a logistics hub to support their further offensive in the south of Ukraine and more importantly for the capture of Mariupol. On March 24, 2022, Ukrainian forces attacked the port, and inflicted the heaviest naval loss onto the Russian navy since the beginning of the invasion. The Russian alligator-class landing ship "Saratov" was sunk. (LCA, 2024) (Wikipedia, 2024)



Above is an image of the port of Berdyansk, with one Russian naval ship "Saratov" on fire, before it sank. (Wikipedia, 2022)

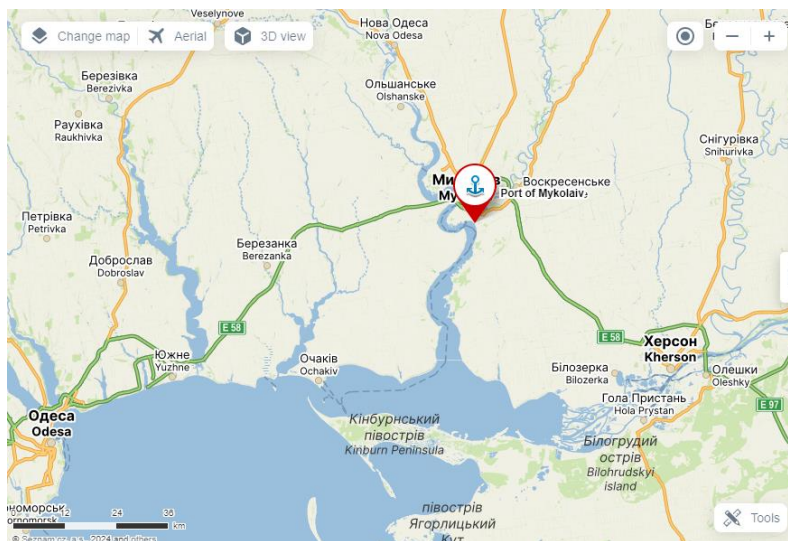
2. Mariupol – A port located in the city of Mariupol, along the coast of the Sea of Azov. The port specializes in grain, metal, coal, construction materials, oil, food and containers. Annual cargo tonnage measured in 2016 was 7.6 million tons, although true capacity of the port can see up to 18.8 million tons of cargo yearly. The port of Mariupol as of June 2022 is under Russian control. Mariupol’s strategic location served useful for the Russian army and a devastating loss for Eastern Ukraine. This port served as a major hub for East Ukraine’s industries such as agriculture, metal plants and coal. The subsequent capture by the Russians gave them full control of the Sea of Azov, and by May 26, 2022, Russia reopened the port to commercial trade. (Global Energy Monitor Wiki, 2024) (LCA, 2024)
  
3. Kerch – Kerch is one of the largest cities in Crimea and its port is strategically positioned between the Black and Azov Sea. The port of Kerch specializes in metal, glass, cotton, vehicles, coal and containers. This seaport can handle up to 2,5 million tonnes of cargo per year. The port of Kerch as of late February 2014 was seized by Russian forces during the annexation of Crimea, and effectively handles almost no cargo yearly. In 2020, the port handled just 238 tonnes of caego. This port, when in full operation had a crucial role in Ukraine’s economy, facilitating trade between Ukraine and Russia as well as other countries. Kerch is also significant for Ukraine’s fishing industry, due to its proximity to rich fishing grounds in the Black and Azov seas. (Global Energy Montior Wiki, 2023) (LCA, 2024)



Above a picture of Kerch’s important strategic location, connecting the Sea of Azov to the Black Sea. (BBC, 2018)

4. Odesa – Located near the city of Odesa, the port of Odesa is the largest Ukrainian seaport and one of the largest in the Black Sea. The port of Odesa handles cargo such as metal, grain, sugar, vehicles, wood, coal, chemicals and containers. The port has extensive facilities including specialised terminals for bulk cargo, containers, oil, and passenger services. Odesa is crucial for Ukraine's economy, exporting key commodities such as grain, metal products, and machinery. Port of Odesa handles up to 40 million tonnes of cargo annually. Currently, this seaport is still under Ukrainian control, but has been partly damaged and continues to face unexpected turmoil due to the conflict of the two countries. Because of the conflict, threats and attacks on the port are adamant, and access to the Black Sea is a contentious issue. (Sea Rates, 2024) (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA Logistics Cluster, 2024)
5. Chornomorsk – Located in the city of Chornomorsk (formerly known as Illichivsk) on the Black Sea coast of Ukraine. Chornomorsk itself is situated near the city of Odesa as discussed previously. This seaport specialises in cargo such as grain, vehicles, food stuff, cotton, and containers. The port exports agricultural products and metals. Chornomorsk has modern facilities for handling containers, bulk cargo, and general cargo. The port processes typically 10 to 15 million tonnes of cargo annually. This port remains under Ukrainian control and is operational, however it has been partly damaged throughout the war. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA Logistics Cluster, 2024)
6. Pivdennyi – A commercial port in the Ukrainian city of Yuzhne near Odesa on the Black Sea coast. Pivdennyi specialises in cargo such as liquids, chemicals, construction materials and coal. The port has modern facilities including deep water berths, bulk terminals, container terminals, and liquid terminals. Pivdennyi handles between 25-30 million tonnes of cargo annually. The port remains under the control of Ukrainians, but has been partly damaged due to the conflict. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA Logistics Cluster, 2024)
7. Mykolaiv – Mykolaiv is located on the convergence of the Southern Bug and Dniro rivers, approximately 65 kilometres north east of Odesa. Because of its access to rivers, it serves as a strategic location for both river and sea transport. The port specialises in cargo such as grain, cement, wood, oil, metal and containers. It has deep water berths which can accomodate large vessels, and has specialised terminals for bulk, general cargo and containers. Mykolaiv handles annually around 20-25

million tonnes of cargo. This port still remains under Ukrainian control but has been damaged due to the conflict. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)



Above a picture of the location of the Port of Mykolaiv, which is situated on the convergence of the River Dnipro and Southern Bug. (Google Maps)

8. Olvia – Located near the Black Sea and in close proximity to the city of Mykolaiv, the Port of Olvia is about 60 kilometres from the Dniester Estuary where the River Dniester flows into the Black Sea. The port specialises in handling bulk cargo, particularly grains, oilseeds, and fertilizers. It can also accommodate containers and general cargo. This port is currently under Ukrainian control, but due to its close proximity of the current conflict it has affected operations in the area and been damaged. In terms of cargo, Olvia handles around 2-3 million tonnes annually. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)
9. Kherson – Located in southern Ukraine on the Dnipro River, is an important port due to its strategic location which allows for both river and sea transport. The port handles cargo such as grain, cement, wood, oil products, metal and containers. The port has various terminals which handle bulk, general, and container cargo, and has deep water berths as well as modern cargo handling equipment which enable efficient loading and discharging operations. Currently, the Port of Kherson is under Russian control since early 2022 when Russian forces were able to successfully capture the city of Kherson. Before its occupation in 2022, the port handled annually 3-4 million tonnes of cargo, however currently its operational status has been severely impacted. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)

10. Bilhorod-Dnistrovsk – Situated near the mouth of the River Dniester, approximately 80 kilometres southwest of Odesa, is a smaller seaport in Ukraine. While not as large as other Ukrainian seaports, Bilhorod port plays a role in regional trade. It handles annually 1-2 million tonnes of cargo. The port can manage cargo including bulk and general cargo, and exports agricultural products. This port remains under Ukrainian control but has been damaged extensively and is not fully operational at the moment. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)
11. Feodosiya – Located in Crimea on the eastern coast of the peninsula and northern coast of the Black Sea. Port of Feodosiya plays a role in local economy, exporting items such as agricultural products and metals. The port handles 1-3 million tonnes of cargo annually. Due to the annexation of Crimea, this port is no longer under Ukrainian control, and is currently being used by the Russian state. (LCA, 2024)
12. Izmail – The port of Izmail is located on the Danube River in southern Ukraine, and its strategic position allows access to both the Danube and the Black Sea. The port has several terminals specialised in dealing with bulk, containers and general cargo. This port is vital for Ukraine's economy, particularly due to its exportation of agricultural products such as grain and oilseeds. The Port of Izmail typically handles 3-5 million tonnes of cargo annually. This port remains under Ukrainian administration. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)
13. Reni – The port of Reni, like Izmail is located on the Danube River near the border of Romania. It is located about 150 kilometres from the Black Sea making it an inland port. Due to its inland location, the Port of Reni is connected well with rail and highway infrastructure, and facilitates the movement of goods to and from Europe, particularly through Romania. It plays an important role in Ukraine's economy particularly with the exportation of agricultural products. Reni typically handles 1-2 million tonnes of cargo annually. This port has been damaged in the conflict, but still remains under Ukrainian control. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)
14. Yevpatoriya – Located on the western coast of the Crimean Peninsula, near the city of Yevpatoriya. It serves as an important fishing and commercial port, mainly dealing in mineral bulk. Due to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, this port is currently under Russian control. The port handles several hundred thousand tonnes of cargo each year depending on seasonal activity. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)

15. Sevastopol – Located on the southwestern coast of the Crimean Peninsula, it has served as an important naval base as well as a commercial port for centuries. Due to its strategic location on the Black Sea, its deep waters and surrounding hills have made Sevastopol a safe haven for vessels be it commercial or naval. The port handles mainly general cargo, bulk materials, and some container traffic. Due to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, this port is no longer under Ukrainian administration. Annually, Sevastopol handles up to 3 million tonnes of cargo. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)
16. Dniprobuzhsky – Situated on the Dnipro River, Dniprobuzhsky is an inland port. The port primarily handles bulk cargo specifically agricultural, construction, and industrial cargo. Due to its inland location, Dniprobuzhsky provides access to both domestic and international shipping routes, making it an important hub for regional trade particularly for the central part of Ukraine. Annually, the port handles several hundred thousand tonnes of cargo. It still remains under Ukrainian control, however has been damaged partly. (LCA, 2024)
17. Dnipro – Located on the Dnipro River in the city of Dnipro, it serves as an inland port. The port primarily handles bulk materials, general cargo and containers. Common cargo includes agricultural products, construction materials and industrial goods. Although Dnipro is a river port and does not handle a large volume of goods, the port is vital for connecting with other Ukrainian cities and parts of Eastern Europe. Dnipro handles up to one million tonnes of cargo annually. It is still under Ukrainian control. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)
18. Zaporizhzhia – Another port located on the Dnipro River, is a significant river port for domestic and regional trade. It is facilitated to handle bulk, general cargo and containers. Common cargo include metals, agricultural products, and industrial goods. The port typically handles one million tonnes of cargo annually, although this may fluctuate based on season and economic conditions. The port remains under Ukrainian control. (Wikipedia, 2024) (LCA, 2024)

### **3.2 Pre-2014 Contribution of Shipping to Ukraine's Economy**

Before the year 2014 the shipping and maritime industry held a position in Ukraine's economy making up about 3 to 4 percent of the nation's GDP. In the year 2013 Ukrainian ports managed 130 million tons of goods with a portion consisting of agricultural goods, metals and chemicals. The maritime sector played a role in exports with around 60 percent of Ukraine's exports relying on maritime transportation highlighting its significance in the country's economic structure. (Ruta, n.d.)

The industry also offered jobs to more than 100,000 people in ports and associated services directly. Many others indirectly through supply chains and local businesses. There was a focus on improving port infrastructure with a spending of approximately \$200 million leading up to 2014 to boost capacity and effectiveness. Odesa and Mykolaiv ports in Ukraine played a role as trade centers in the Black Sea area that linked Europe with Asia and the Middle East. Furthermore, Ukraine had a presence in the Black Sea grain export sector, establishing itself as a key player in global grain exports. In general, the shipping sector played a role in sustaining Ukraine's well-being prior to the emergence of geopolitical conflicts. (Global Infrastructure Facility, 2024)

### **3.3 Post 2014 Contribution of Shipping to Ukraine's Economy**

Since 2014, Ukraine's shipping and maritime industry faced challenges following the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in the Donbas region. These political shifts resulted in a decrease in port operations and cargo handling. From 2014 to 2015, the amount of cargo processed by ports decreased by over 40%, falling from approximately 130 million tons in 2013 to about 70 million tons in 2015. The significant drop was mainly linked to the annexation of Crimea's harbors, like Sevastopol and Kerch, that used to handle about 10 to 15 percent of Ukraine's shipments. Overall cargo volume was significantly affected by the absence of these transport centers, and Ukraine's capacity to trade goods via the Black Sea was greatly affected. (Suprunenko, 2024)

The impact on trade was significant. It had an effect on agricultural exports in Ukraine's maritime economy for a long time. Despite facing challenges along the way, Odesa and Mykolaiv ports managed to cope with some of the decrease in cargo shipments. In 2017, Ukrainian grain exports that heavily rely on transportation started to show signs of recovery. By that point, Ukraine had resumed exporting 39 million tons of grain by sea, reaching levels

than those before 2014 and highlighting the strategic importance of the Black Sea for Ukraine's agricultural trade. Over the years Ukraine also expanded its trading paths to reduce the impact of losing Crimea. This involved relying on ports along the Danube River and other ports in the Black Sea region along with boosting trade through railway and road connections to nations, like Romania and Bulgaria. (Suprunenko, 2024) (UA Government, 2023)

In the realm of infrastructure development and expansion efforts, in port facilities were prioritized by both the government and private sector to keep pace with the decrease in cargo volumes and boost capacity levels during the period from 2015 to 2020 with an annual investment of around \$350 million dollars. These investments were primarily directed towards upgrades and enhancements in grain storage and bulk cargo handling capabilities while also focusing on strengthening security protocols. Despite these initiatives aimed at improvement, employment within the maritime industry experienced a decrease as evident by a decline in port operations, employment figures which stood at approximately 80 thousand employees by 2017. However the industry continued to be a player in Ukraine's economy accounting for 2 to 2.5 percent of the GDP after 2014. This marks a decrease, from its share of 2.5 to 2.8 percent. (UA Government, 2018)

Ukraine's maritime sector aimed to enhance its connections with trading allies well. The collaboration with the European Union and Turkey grew significantly crucial for Ukraine's steel exports. Looking ahead to 2020, the sector showed signs of improvement as cargo volumes neared levels seen before 2014. By the closing of the decade, Ukrainian ports were dealing with around 130 million tons of goods each year; this indicating an upturn in sea based commerce. Despite making progress in areas of the industry's development and growth during this time period, it was still significantly impacted by the continuing conflict in the region of the country and the larger geopolitical issues that influenced its direction following 2014. (OEC, 2024)

## **4 Methods and Procedures**

The methodological framework used in my research to investigate the psychological experiences of Ukrainian seafarers in the Black Sea is described in this chapter. This study was intended to document the experiences of sailors as they manage their professional

responsibilities while coping with the psychological and emotional effects of the war at home, given the difficulties presented by the current crisis in Ukraine. This was accomplished by using a qualitative method, which allowed for in-depth interviews to examine the participants' viewpoints. This method not only enables a deeper understanding of personal experiences but also sheds a light on the coping mechanisms employed by mariners to deal with their situation.

## **4.1 Research Design**

The psychological experiences of Ukrainian seafarers in the Black Sea and other conflict ridden areas are investigated in this study using a qualitative research method. The research seeks to understand how seafarers manage their professional and personal lives while working at sea whilst dealing with the continuous war in their home country by concentrating on individual narratives. The reason why I chose to use a qualitative methodology is because it is especially well suited to enable a thorough investigation of the subjective experiences of the participants. To achieve this, I chose a phenomenological approach, which allows me to explore the personal experiences of the interviewees. Because I used this approach, I was able to gather unique perceptions and feelings, providing an insight into how they manage the emotional challenges associated with the conflict.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, where I ask open ended questions to encourage the participants to share their thoughts and experiences freely. This allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of their individual perspectives and coping strategies in what can usually be described as a stressful environment.

## **4.2 Participants**

For my thesis, I focused on Ukrainian seafarers who have experienced the impacts of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine while working as a seafarer. To participate in the interviews, individuals needed to be Ukrainian and have worked as a seafarer at any point between 2014 – current date. I used my own network to connect with participants, leveraging my background as someone who is half Ukrainian. This means that my method for choosing who to interview, is described as non-probability sampling. Applicants were not chosen randomly, as there was a specific criteria for who could be involved.

I was able to successfully interview three people for my research. Two out of the three individuals who were interviewed were still working at sea to this day, and they ranged from being third officers to masters onboard different types of vessels.

### **4.3 Ethical Considerations**

In conducting the interviews, maintaining confidentiality and privacy of the participants was of importance, due to the ongoing conflict between the two nations. To protect their identities and personal information, none of the participants' details will be published in any form that could lead to their identification. All interviews were done with the understanding that participants could share their experiences freely without fear or repercussions. With the above mentioned explained to the interviewees, it encouraged a more honest and open dialogue about their experiences during a challenging time.

### **4.4 Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size, although achieving great qualitative insights, was limited to participants from my personal network, which may not fully represent the broader population of Ukrainian seafarers. Second, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine may have influenced participants' willingness to share their experiences, potentially affecting the depth and openness of their responses. Furthermore, the focus on qualitative data means that the results may not capture statistical trends or patterns. Personal limitations in terms of this thesis, was the challenge of timely communication with my participants, many of whom either work onboard or reside in Ukraine. The ongoing conflict impacted their ability to respond promptly to my interviews as well as any follow-up questions. Factors such as power outages, internet connectivity, work-related obstacles contributed to some delays.

### **4.5 Interview Questions**

For the study, I created interview questions (See chapter 5) to really understand what Ukrainian seafarers have experienced during the conflict while being at work. I came up with twelve open-ended questions that cover different parts of their lives while at sea. I start by asking them about their backgrounds, like the types of ships they've worked on and their job titles. Then, I ask how they felt when the war began and how it has affected their mental

health. I also wanted to hear about specific moments when the conflict really impacted them and if they ever worried about their or their crew's safety. We discuss any communication related issues and how the conflict affected their daily routines and work operations. Through these questions, I gained a clearer picture of their personal and professional challenges.

## **5 Interviews**

In this section, I will share the transcripts from my interviews with Ukrainian seafarers. They spoke about their experiences while working at sea during the conflict, which include their personal life, feelings, the challenges they have faced, and coping mechanisms.

### **5.1 Interview 1**

#### **Part 1 Personal Experiences**

##### **Question 1**

What sort of vessels have you worked on and highest rank on vessel, and where are you from?

I've worked on various types of vessels, including bulk carriers and container ships. My position onboard is Chief Mate and has been for about 10 years now. I'm originally from Ukraine.

##### **Question 2**

How often have you sailed in the area (Black Sea) since the war broke out?

Since the war began, I've sailed in the Black Sea numerous times, cannot remember exactly how many times. A couple of times we berthed in a Ukrainian port, but usually it was either in Romania or Bulgaria. Each trip feels different due to the ongoing tensions and changing conditions.

##### **Question 3**

When the war just broke out in 2014, what sort of emotions did you feel in relation to your career, and why?

Initially, I felt a mix of fear and uncertainty about my future. The conflict made me question whether I would still be able to work at all and how safe it would be, both at home and onboard.

#### **Question 4**

Is there any specific moment during your time at sea when you felt the impact of the conflict most acutely?

One moment that stands out was when we had to change our route because of military activity nearby. It really put things into perspective how dangerous things had become.

#### **Question 5**

How did the ongoing conflict affect your mental well being and emotional state while on board?

The constant tension can be overwhelming. There are days when I feel anxious about the situation, which makes it hard to concentrate on my duties. However, I am fortunate to not be constantly in this part of the world, these emotions only arise when I know I'll be sailing in the region.

#### **Question 6**

Were there instances when you feared for your safety or the safety of your crewmates due to the conflict? Where were you and what happened?

Yes, during one trip, we were in a high-risk area when we received reports of naval manoeuvres nearby. We had to stay alert, and it was a tense atmosphere among the crew.

### **Part 2 Professional Aspect**

#### **Question 7**

How did the conflict impact your daily routines and navigational decisions? Were there areas you had to avoid or alter your plans due to security concerns?

We had to avoid certain zones that were deemed unsafe, which often added extra hours to our routes. It made our planning much more complicated.

#### **Question 8**

Did you encounter any disruptions in communication, such as restricted port access or changes in maritime regulations?

Yes, there were times when we couldn't dock at certain ports due to security concerns, which disrupted our schedules and caused delays.

**Question 9**

Did you receive any specialized training or guidance related to navigating in conflict zones?

We didn't receive formal training, but our company provided briefings on the situation and advised us on safe navigation practices in the area.

**Question 10**

How did you maintain professionalism and focus on your duties despite the challenging circumstances?

I try to focus on my responsibilities and support my crewmates. Keeping a routine helps maintain a sense of normalcy, even when things get stressful.

**Question 11**

How did the conflict impact cargo operations, supply deliveries, and port access? Were there shortages or delays?

Cargo operations have been affected significantly. We faced delays due to port closures and shortages of certain supplies, which made planning difficult, but not impossible.

**Question 12**

How did you maintain your sense of purpose and commitment to your work despite the turmoil?

My commitment to my job and my crew keeps me going. Also the aspect of supporting my family to keep food on the table is an important part of why I do what I do. I remind myself of the importance of our work in keeping trade flowing, even in tough times.

## **5.2 Interview 2**

### **Part 1 Personal Experiences**

#### **Question 1**

What sort of vessels have you worked on and highest rank on vessel, and where are you from?

I've primarily worked on cargo ships, mostly operating in the Mediterranean and other regions. I currently work as a third officer, and I'm from Ukraine.

#### **Question 2**

How often have you sailed in the area (Black Sea) since the war broke out?

I've only sailed in the Black Sea a couple of times since the war began. Most of my recent work has taken me to other routes. However, pre-war time we did sail more often back home especially to ports such as Mariupol and Odesa.

#### **Question 3**

When the war just broke out in 2014, what sort of emotions did you feel in relation to your career, and why?

I never felt nervous or worried about my career in that sense, I know that I can always find a job at sea no matter my nationality or which part of the world I would be in. The thought of my family facing danger back home was my most constant source of stress.

#### **Question 4**

Is there any specific moment during your time at sea when you felt the impact of the conflict most acutely?

While I haven't had direct experiences in conflict zones, there was a time when we received updates about escalating tensions back home. It made me realize how interconnected everything is, and I felt helpless being far away.

#### **Question 5**

How did the ongoing conflict affect your mental well being and emotional state while on board?

Being away from my family during such uncertain times has been challenging. I often find myself worrying about their safety and the impact of the war on their daily lives, which sometimes distracts me from my duties.

### **Question 6**

Were there instances when you feared for your safety or the safety of your crewmates due to the conflict? Where were you and what happened?

While I haven't faced direct threats, there was a moment when we were near the coast of Bulgaria, and I overheard discussions about military activities nearby. It made me uneasy and reminded me of the fragile situation back home.

## **Part 2 Professional Aspect**

### **Question 7**

How did the conflict impact your daily routines and navigational decisions? Were there areas you had to avoid or alter your plans due to security concerns?

Although I haven't had to avoid the Black Sea specifically, I've noticed our company is more cautious about routing. There's a heightened awareness of security, which affects planning even in nearby regions.

### **Question 8**

Did you encounter any disruptions in communication, such as restricted port access or changes in maritime regulations?

I've seen some changes in port regulations, especially in Eastern Europe. Communication with family has been challenging at times, especially when we're in areas with limited connectivity.

### **Question 9**

Did you receive any specialized training or guidance related to navigating in conflict zones?

I haven't received specialized training, but there have been discussions about best practices for staying safe and aware of our surroundings. My experience and intuition guide me when navigating uncertain waters.

### **Question 10**

How did you maintain professionalism and focus on your duties despite the challenging circumstances?

I try to stay focused on my work by keeping a routine and communicating with my crewmates. Sharing our concerns helps us support each other, and that camaraderie keeps morale up.

### **Question 11**

How did the conflict impact cargo operations, supply deliveries, and port access? Were there shortages or delays?

I haven't directly experienced cargo disruptions, but I've heard from colleagues that some ports face delays due to security checks and limited access, impacting overall supply chains.

### **Question 12**

How did you maintain your sense of purpose and commitment to your work despite the turmoil?

I remind myself that my work is vital for supporting my family and contributing to the economy. Knowing that my efforts help others keeps me motivated, even when I'm far from home.

## **5.3 Interview 3**

### **Part 1 Personal Experiences**

#### **Question 1**

What sort of vessels have you worked on and highest rank on vessel, and where are you from?

In my career I have worked on bulk and container vessels. Highest position was master. I worked as a second and chief officer on bulk carriers. Chief mate and master on container vessel. I was born in Ukraine.

#### **Question 2**

How often have you sailed in the area (Black Sea) since the war broke out?

In my career, I was fortunate to not sail in the Black Sea when the war started until this date.

**Question 3**

When the war just broke out in 2014, what sort of emotions did you feel in relation to your career, and why?

I was afraid for myself and my family since I reside in one of the more high-conflict areas that the war has seen. In relation to my career, I was always able to be employed and carried out my duties to the fullest.

**Question 4**

Is there any specific moment during your time at sea when you felt the impact of the conflict most acutely?

Even though we never sailed in the area, the only times when I felt any emotion to the ongoing trouble at home was seeing my crewmates worry for their families and friends. Morale was often low onboard, but everybody still had a job to do and did it without any problems.

**Question 5**

How did the ongoing conflict affect your mental well being and emotional state while on board?

To be honest, I try not to let the conflict weigh on me too much. I focus on my job and what needs to be done at sea. While I know it's a serious situation, I find it easier to concentrate on my duties rather than get caught up in the worries about home.

**Question 6**

Were there instances when you feared for your safety or the safety of your crewmates due to the conflict? Where were you and what happened?

Since I cannot relate to the Black Sea and its conflicts there, there have still been times when transiting in other high-risk areas due to piracy or storms where we need to be fully attentive and take special precautions to be safe onboard.

**Part 2 Professional Aspect****Question 7**

How did the conflict impact your daily routines and navigational decisions? Were there areas you had to avoid or alter your plans due to security concerns?

Our company has become more cautious, often rerouting to avoid regions that are seen as high-risk. We now factor in security reports much more seriously, which adds an extra layer of complexity to our navigation and scheduling. It's a reminder of how interconnected the maritime world is, even when I'm far from the conflict zone.

**Question 8**

Did you encounter any disruptions in communication, such as restricted port access or changes in maritime regulations?

I have not dealt with this.

**Question 9**

Did you receive any specialized training or guidance related to navigating in conflict zones?

Extra training was provided by the company for getting in and out of dangerous shipping zones.

**Question 10**

How did you maintain professionalism and focus on your duties despite the challenging circumstances?

Until you drown or get a bullet to the head, you always stay focused and professional.

**Question 11**

How did the conflict impact cargo operations, supply deliveries, and port access? Were there shortages or delays?

As I am not a sailor currently, but working as a harbour master, my observation is that some cargo has shifted from Azov Sea to Black Sea harbours. Instead of export, we get much more imported goods such as coal.

**Question 12**

How did you maintain your sense of purpose and commitment to your work despite the turmoil?

No matter what, you do your job and worry about everything else later.

## **6 Results**

In this part of the study we look into the interviews, with three sailors to understand their experiences and work related challenges amidst the conflict from 2014 to 2022. Similar patterns were noted in their stories regarding the effects of the conflict, on their jobs and overall mental health.

### **6.1 Personal Experiences**

All three participants shared a strong connection to Ukraine and expressed concern for their families back home. They all showed worry for their loved ones in their homeland, and their emotions they experienced differed slightly but the general feelings of fear and concern were evident throughout their conversations. The first person shared feelings of both fear and uncertainty regarding their journey at sea while the second person expressed stress primarily over the safety of their family back home. The third individual felt fear not for themselves but for their family members despite experiencing fewer direct impacts such as working in the Black Sea directly. A sense of shared weight was apparent, among them all.

It's interesting that the first two individuals saw changes in their work environment because of the conflict directly impacting them and the third person who hadn't been to the Black Sea since the war, observed how their colleagues' concerns affected the team spirit onboard their vessel. It illustrates that despite not being in conflict areas themselves, the feeling of the emotional strain of war can influence workplace dynamics.

### **6.2 Professional Aspects**

In terms of professional experience, all participants noted changes in their daily routines and navigational decisions due to heightened security concerns. The first participant discussed avoiding certain zones, which complicated planning and added extra hours to their routes. Similarly, the second participant observed that their company had become more cautious about routing, reflecting a general trend of increased vigilance among seafarers. The third

participant, while not directly navigating conflict zones, indicated that their company had adjusted protocols to prioritize safety and security in high-risk areas.

All three seafarers reported disruptions in communication and operations due to the conflict. The first two participants experienced restricted port access and delays in cargo operations, while the third mentioned shifts in cargo patterns because of the conflict, showing how the war has affected the broader maritime landscape.

### **6.3 Mental Well-Being**

The interviews also revealed a common thread regarding mental well-being. All participants expressed the challenge of maintaining focus on their duties while dealing with the emotional weight of the conflict. The first participant mentioned feeling anxious about sailing in the region, while the second noted that being away from family during uncertain times was a significant concern. The third participant adopted a more pragmatic approach, focusing on their work as a way to cope. This illustrates the different ways seafarers manage their mental health while navigating the complexities of their professional roles amidst ongoing turmoil.

Overall, the responses highlight the shared experiences of Ukrainian seafarers in the face of conflict, emphasizing both the emotional and operational challenges they encounter. Their narratives provide a deeper understanding of how the war has impacted their lives at sea and their commitment to their work.

## **7 Conclusion**

The continuous dispute between Russia and Ukraine has deeply affected sailors in ways impacting their work and personal life significantly. The research involved interviews, with three seafarers to reveal the psychological hurdles they encounter while working in the maritime sector amidst this crisis.

Personally speaking everyone showed worry for the well being of their families and the unpredictable circumstances awaiting them back home. Their emotional responses differed slightly. From feeling scared and anxious, about their safety to constantly fretting about their loved ones.. They all had a sense of duty and commitment to their responsibilities, at sea amidst the chaos. The emotional burden of being separated from family during times of conflict often added to the pressure of navigating through a shifting and risky setting.

In the realm the conflict has caused disturbances, in operational logistics. Seafarers have been required to adjust their routes to steer clear of regions and handle port entry. The effects on cargo activities resulted in delays and interruptions in the supply network have added another layer of complexity to the role of maritime workers. The feeling of unpredictability has been amplified by the necessity for planning and frequent communication disruptions with loved ones home leading to increased stress and unpredictability in their work routines.

Despite facing these obstacles head on in their lives at sea and onshore work environments as brought to light by the series of interviews conducted with them. It is notable that Ukrainian sailors exhibited remarkable resilience and flexibility in navigating these challenging circumstances on a personal level as well, as within their professional capacities. Each individual interviewed emphasized the significance of adhering to a schedule fostering bonds with their peers and staying focused on their responsibilities as strategies for managing the pressures associated with the ongoing conflict. Moreover they found solace in having a sense of purpose driving them forward. Be it their dedication to their work, and the imperative to provide for loved ones back home, or their dedication to upholding economic balance and commercial relations amidst times of war.

This research focuses on how geopolitical conflicts affect the shipping sector and particularly highlights the strain experienced by individuals working in areas impacted by such conflicts. Ukrainian sailors remain players in the maritime field, in trade despite facing risks firsthand. This showcases resilience and ability to adapt during difficult times. The results also indicate a requirement, for assistance for sailors operating in regions of conflict; this could involve improved health services and communication plans aimed at tackling the emotional and psychological hurdles faced while working in environments prone to instability.

In summary Ukrainian sailors have encountered challenges in their work and personal lives as a result of the war. Their dedication, to their jobs and their ability to persevere in times highlight their strength. However the ongoing conflict has revealed the weaknesses, within the sector and the people who depend on it. These discoveries provide perspectives on how conflicts affect people psychologically and emphasize the importance of supporting seafarers who operate under challenging circumstances.

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