



SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

Yuri Felshtinsky reports on the similarities with the current situation in Ukraine and Russia's invasion in 2014 and explains why the country needs more military aid

Ukkraine's fight against its invader Russia seems to be in the ascendant with explosions rocking a Russian military base in Crimea, reports of Ukrainian special forces being active there, and President Zelensky confidently stating that the war must end with: "Crimea – its liberation". Aid is pouring in from fellow nations to help Ukraine fight some 120 battalions (800 troops each at full strength) inside Ukraine and more stationed on the border. Another Ukrainian initiative may have left up to 20,000 Russian troops without

supply lines along the Dnipro river that bisects East and West Ukraine. It would be unwise, however, to draw any firm conclusions from this encouraging news about Ukraine routing its invader.

Ukraine was here before in 2014. In July and August that year, there were fierce battles. Cities changed hands etc. Ukraine was doing well. Then, round about 24 August, Ukraine Independence Day since its escape from the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a dramatic shift. Russian commanders inflicted the biggest defeat on Ukraine at the Battle of Ilovaik.

Ukraine cannot use military aid to launch cross-border attacks on Russian troops in Russian territory

It proved a pivotal moment. Russian troops poured into the Donetsk region, occupied it and moved closer to harbour city Mariupol. The rest is history as the defeat forced Ukraine to the negotiation table in Minsk, Belarus, for months and months and months of 'peace talks' about East Ukraine. They were meaningless – except for the fact that Crimea was the elephant in the room. Russia did not allow Ukraine any discussion of what it had done. At the talks the West closed ranks with Russia. It, too, acquiesced in Russia's blatant land grab, hoping that its aggression would quickly evaporate like a very unpleasant smell. The parallels here with Sudetenland in 1938-39 are painful and plentiful. What was it about the 24th that made the difference in 2014 and why does it matter today?

It was hardly the fact that it was Ukraine Independence Day. As far as the Kremlin is concerned that day is a joke and no one in Moscow pays any attention to it, except to scoff at it. Since 2007, plenty of members of Putin's inner circle have made it clear that it is current state policy to consider the borders of the Russian Federation to be those of the Soviet Union of 1922 and extended by Stalin in 1939-1945. Never mind that the ideological thrust of the USSR was the 'union' of the international proletariat and Putin's 'federation' is one based on the polar opposite – Russian nationalism. Both are derived straight from Moscow's rule book invented by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia in the 18th century, under whom

Russia's expansion first reached Eastern Ukraine, Crimea and the Black Sea.

There are two things that do matter about the last week of August. The first is that it is the beginning of the election season in Russia. 11 September is Election Day for Russia's rolling regional elections. These are the type of 'elections' that Stalin would recognise. It is not the people who vote who matter, it is the people who count the votes that matter. Since 2000, Putin has made sure it is the Kremlin that does the counting.

RUSSIAN COMMANDERS INFLICTED THE BIGGEST DEFEAT ON UKRAINE AT THE BATTLE OF ILOVAISK

Even so, like the team of Coriolanus Snow in the Hunger Games, the Kremlin needs to put together a good show to lead into them so that the optics justify that Putin's United Russia Party wins everywhere yet again for more than two decades straight. Such as a ringing military victory and a defeated underling. Election Day was on 14 September in 2014 and on cue the Kremlin forced Ukraine to agree to a cease fire on 5 September in Minsk. And in 2020 it was Alexei Navalny, a serious rival nationalist threat (paradoxically celebrated in the West despite his rabid nationalism). He was poisoned on 20 August.

But there is a far more important day looming behind the month of September. It is really the one date that makes everyone in the Kremlin shake with fear. That day is 7 October, Vladimir Putin's birthday. On that day, there is a roll call of the President's magnificent achievements that year. In previous years, the Kremlin has arguably gone above and beyond. Putin's birthday has, for example, coincided with the killing in cold blood of opposition journalist Anna Politovskaya's in 2006 (followed weeks later by Putin's former KGB underling – of the same rank as he – and my co-author and friend Colonel Alexander Litvinenko). This year is particularly special as it is Putin's 70th birthday.

Given the very public invasion of Ukraine on 24 February this year, everyone in the Kremlin is aware that the 'show' for this September's Election Day had better be spectacular. An announcement about a major victory in the 'liberation' of Ukraine will need to be made by hook or by crook – one that makes the Kremlin and Russia look all-powerful to the electorate. And this will have to hold throughout the month of September for that all important roll call of the President's Achievements on his seventieth that follows thereafter.

A major military success like the decisive 2014 Battle of Ilovaik is the obvious answer. Such an attack may well be imminent in the weeks ahead. The Ministry of Defence warned recently that Russia is about to form a major new ground forces unit, the 3rd Army Corps of up to 15-20,000 troops.

One could point out that the difference with 2014 is that Ukraine has an army of up to 1 million troops and that many Russian-speaking Ukrainians today hate Russia with a vengeance. While these

are previously unthinkable developments, it would be a naïve reading of the crisis Russia sparked on 24 February. Ukraine is still fighting an uneven war. The Russian navy in the Black Sea may be old and tired, but Ukraine has no navy at all so those superannuated Russian battleships can obliterate Ukraine's coastline without punishment – as they did successfully with their destruction of the harbour city of Mariupol. On its coastline, Ukraine continues to be pummelled without mercy.

THE MAIN DIFFERENCE WITH 2014 IS THAT UKRAINE HAS AN ARMY OF UP TO 1 MILLION TROOPS

Ukraine's hands are tied behind its back in another way, too. Its army is entirely dependent on foreign military aid, guns, ammunition *etc*, which can only be used for very specific purposes. Ukraine cannot use this aid to launch cross-border attacks as Russian troops on Russian territory are off-bounds. It's hard to win a war if all your opponent has to do is cross the border and move behind an invisible shield.

DOING JUST ENOUGH

This is not down to Ukraine's bad luck. Traditionally foreign military aid in crisis such as Ukraine's always favour a certain outcome: enough to stop the aggressor, not enough to force removal from territory gained. It is there to maintain a status quo, not to force a conclusion. That default outlook of the West certainly was the case in 2014 in Minsk

and the interminable empty Accords that followed. To push Russia back to its 1991 borders, Ukraine needs far more military aid than it is receiving to date.

The big question for Zelensky in 2022 Kyiv is undoubtedly: what will our allies do in case of a major assault? Will Ukraine finally get enough aid to humiliate Russia and rout such an all-out attack to avoid an Ilovaisk II. The same question must be alive in allied capitols, but seen from the other side. It is the 2014 problem all over again, but at a far aggravated level. Can we risk antagonising Putin by inflicting a ringing defeat on him that will puncture the Kremlin's balloon? What will he do then? In 2014, the fear was only about Russian gas and pipelines which had been switched on and off by way of threat. Today the fear of retaliation is well beyond the commercial. Yet it is only sufficient and overwhelming military aid that will finally contain the crisis to Ukraine's borders. Today's status quo favours the Kremlin. Putin has waged a war against Ukraine independence since 1999 and is prepared to wait, regroup, and come back stronger to achieve his goal.

But NATO countries, and that includes Turkey, still do not realise that each time you give a dictator a pass you magnify your own problems in the future. If you worry, say, about a mystery explosion of the nuclear reactor at Zaporizhzya nuclear power plant by way of retaliation for a defeat, think about what you will have to worry about in the foreseeable future when Belarus is fully up and running as the 10th nuclear power in the world. Moscow can then act as if it has nothing to do with Belarus's nuclear decisions or 'mistakes'. I am not convinced that historical lessons have been learned from the recent and more distant past by the many countries who support Ukraine with military aid, but still not enough of it for him to win. Zelensky's headache must count as our own ●

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Ukraine's army is entirely dependent on foreign military aid



Picture credit: MOD of Ukraine