

Ukraine: "Battalions Request Fire"

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Ceasefire impossible to implement amid ongoing bloodshed in east.

The unilateral ceasefire announced by President Petro Poroshenko is a purely political step, the sort of final warning that scares no one. A last gesture of goodwill intended to persuade the West and the Russian Federation of Ukraine's readiness to negotiate.

But this so-called ceasefire has nothing in common with the logic of real war in the east. After all, only an incorrigible romantic would believe that the fighters of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics would surrender their arms en masse, and the Russian mercenaries who form the core would go home.

The war in the east has its own merciless logic. Ukraine's armed forces were all but dismantled by Kremlin agents, and it has never fought an opponent like this on its own territory. It was only a matter of time before there were large casualties.

The first of these were seven members of the 95th Zhitomir airborne/armoured brigade killed in an ambush [on May 13] near the village of Oktyabrskoe in Kramatorsk district. Militants carried out a very professional attack on the convoy of two armoured personnel carriers and two trucks. They allowed one armoured vehicle to go ahead and then used a brand-new RPG-26 rocket launcher to hit it in the engine, its most vulnerable spot. They torched a Ural truck that was carrying a mortar, and then opened accurate sniper fire.

That was followed [on May 22] by the senseless, stupid loss of 17 infantrymen, some of them recently mobilised, from the 51st Volyn Mechanised Brigade. They thoughtlessly stopped for a roadside picnic near Volnovakha, and did not even remove the covers from the gun-barrels on their BMP infantry fighting vehicle. Enemy scouts filmed them drinking tea the day before, and the video clearly shows them with no magazines in their rifles. That shows what happens when basic combat precautions are ignored.

The next shock was the death of 12 people in a helicopter that was shot down [on May 29] They included General Sergey Kulchitsky, who was popular among National Guard members. Then [June 6] the militants did even better with their new portable surface-to-air missile system – they brought down an An-30 plane flying over Slavyansk at a fair height.

The biggest casualties came with the deaths of 49 officers and men – aircrew and members of the 25th Dnepropetrovsk Airborne Brigade on June 14 at Lugansk airport.

All that within under two months. Of course the counter-terrorism forces are producing results with their military and special operations, for instance the routing of the [pro-Russia] Vostok Battalion at Donetsk airport. But the logic of the conflict shows that there can be no effective ceasefire at this point. Unless of course, Poroshenko as armed forces supreme commander begs Putin for mercy.

The Donbas is used to mass fatalities. No other region of Ukraine has buried so many men who died together at their workplace at the same time, or so often. Young and old, in both the Donetsk and the Lugansk regions. Various mines, at various points since the country became independent, have regularly produced dozens of bodies of miners who were suffocated, burn or crushed in explosions and fires, on top of the millions of tons of coal they generated. Sixty-three at the Skochinsky mine in Donetsk in 1998, 81 at the Barakov mine in Krasnodon in 2000, and 106 dead in an explosion at the Zasyadko mine – a real powderkeg – in 2007. Those are just the biggest cases. Single deaths and accidents killing ten, 20, 30 or even 50 miners at a time, for example at the legendary Zasyadko mine, boost these depressing numbers.

I well remember the mass funerals held at various mines in various towns, with dozens of coffins and thousands of desperate grieving relatives, and the even larger numbers of friends, acquaintances, neighbours and other residents shocked at the mass scale of the deaths. Year in, year out, like a war everyone had grown accustomed to. With its roots in the Soviet period, this could not but leave a mark on the consciousness, feelings and mentality of many people in Donbass. The price of life was significantly and artificially lowered there, especially among the working class. Their readiness to stake their lives on accident or on management stupidity was expressed in concrete terms, in money. The main thing was to get paid.

Meanwhile, the criminal and oligarchic regional political and business elites got rich on the back of these deaths. They in turn had emerged out of the bloody gangster wars of the wild 1990s. The high-profile crimes of the that time, like the murders of Bragin, Momot, Scherban and many lesser businessmen just added to a depressing picture.

I say this to illustrate the terrible tradition that has grown up over the years of disregarding human life – one’s own and others’; the real and sometimes fatalistic sense of the proximity of death; the influence of gangster law and rules; and the slavish obedience that the lumpenproletariat offers its masters, the powers that be. All of that has provided hugely fertile ground for widening the social base for terrorism in Donbas.

The local people who swell the ranks of the armed bands of professional mercenaries, of all those Strelkovs, Bes’s and other evil forces [reference to Igor Girkin aka Strelok; and Igor Bezler aka Bes], are very easy to manipulate by scaring them with the Right Sector phantom, by brainwashing them with propaganda about defending civilians from “punitive forces” and nonsense about how “Donbas feeds everyone else”, or simply by buying them with the billions stolen by [ex-president Viktor] Yanukovich and his inner chamber.

[**Note:** the article title "Battalions Request Fire" comes from a Second World War story by Yury Bondarev.]

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