

The conflict in Ukraine

A paper based on a presentation to the Institute in Sydney on 25 June 2024 by

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Ukraine's ambassador provides the historical background to the war between Russia and Ukraine, before outlining progress in the war to date and describing how he and his family have experienced it. Next, he emphasises the importance of international aid to Ukraine, including from Australia, pointing out the relevance of the conflict to Australia resulting from the threat Russia poses in the Pacific and globally. He concludes by summarising the cost of the war to Ukraine so far and suggesting a potential role for international diplomacy in ending the conflict.

Key words: Australia; conflict; diplomacy; military aid; Russia; Ukraine.

In this paper, I will share with you my story. I was still in Ukraine when the war started. At five o'clock in the morning, my wife woke me and said: "I hear explosions. The war has started." It was one of the scariest moments of my life. I will never forget it.

The Lead-up to the War

Three months before that there had been a build-up of Russian troops on Ukraine's borders. Many discussions in Ukraine and elsewhere focused on whether Russia would invade. A lot of analysts concluded it was not going to happen seeing the Russian build-up as creating strategic ambiguity and as a way to intimidate Ukraine and to force Ukraine into concessions.

Just two weeks before the invasion, I participated in a discussion on French-Ukrainian relations at an event organised by a leading think tank, the French Institute for International Relations, in Paris. At that time the United States government was very clear that the Russians were about to invade. But at the same time, many analysts in France, as well as the government of France, were not convinced, nor was the German government. All these countries are part of NATO. So for me, it was mind boggling. These countries all had the same intelligence, but they differed in their interpretation of it. I still do not have an answer as to why this was so. The chief of the German intelligence service was in Ukraine on 23 February 2022 when the war started. He was then rescued and evacuated back home.

But it was much more complicated. I think what was missing was the way we interpreted Vladimir Putin, and his rationale for the invasion. For him, it looked like a perfect moment. The withdrawal of the American troops from Afghanistan had not gone as planned. Upcoming elections in France ensured that the French would be focused on domestic issues. Russia's relationship with Germany was quite solid and the German economy was heavily dependent on the supply of Russian gas. And, of course, the Putin plan was for a blitzkrieg to take over Ukraine in two weeks or faster. Yet now, two years and four months later, we are still standing in opposing trenches.

I think Putin underestimated the resilience of the Ukrainian people – our preparedness to fight, our willingness to get united, and our ability to sacrifice our lives to defend the country. He was missing sound intelligence as to how the Ukrainian people would react. Probably, he had been told he would be greeted with flowers. But that did not happen. It was at that moment that Ukrainians united, encouraged by a true leader, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who was able to communicate with them from day one. That legendary video he recorded helped when, holding his phone and looking into the camera, he said: "I'm here, my team is here, and we're here to fight". And a bit later he said: "I need ammunition". It was a very clear message to the international community, to all our partners, to actually come up with support for Ukraine. We would not have been able to withstand this brutal attack without the support of over 50 nations who have come together to help rescue Ukraine.

Ukraine's Recent History

But now I would like to take you further back into Ukraine's history. For much of Ukraine's 10-century history, Ukraine has been a colony of Russia. In 1917, following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Ukraine briefly became an independent state. A Ukrainian national republic was proclaimed in 1917. Over the next four years, we had several governments in place until 1921, and that was the only modern-day statehood that Ukraine had enjoyed until recent times. In 1921, when the Communists created the Soviet Union, they crushed our independence and incorporated us in the Soviet Union.

Then, in 1930, the Soviet leadership under Stalin undertook a major collectivisation programme, forcing people to join collective farms. For every Ukrainian, owning a piece of land was extremely important. It was almost a sacred rite to have a piece of land, and Ukrainians did not want to give up their land to the state. The farmers heavily resisted the Soviet Union's

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collectivisation policies. To punish Ukrainians for their resistance, Stalin organised one of the biggest man-made famines in world history. As a result of that famine in 1932-1933, over 5 million Ukrainians starved to death. It was just horrible.

In 1937, Stalin organised a major repression of public intellectuals throughout the Soviet Union. Ukraine was heavily targeted because it was seen as a source of nationalism and resistance to the Soviet rule. To subdue any kind of resistance, Stalin removed many Ukrainian writers, composers and key opinion leaders, who were sent to gulags or just killed.

In 1939, Stalin colluded with Nazi Germany and must accept some blame for the Second World War. Germany's opening strike of the War against Poland was facilitated by a secret pact between the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union invaded the Baltic nations and eastern Poland at the same time as Germany invaded Poland from the west. Of course, Stalin did not anticipate that the Nazis would renege on the secret pact and invade the Soviet Union in 1941.

Over the next four years, much of the fighting on the eastern front took place in Ukraine. The Ukrainian nation probably suffered more than any other nation in 1942-1945. If we estimate that the Soviet losses in the Second World War were up to 26 million, at least 12 million of those were Ukrainians. So, you can imagine the level of trauma that the country had to go through.

Throughout its existence, but especially during the Second World War, the Soviet Union was an evil empire. It could not last long. The economy did not work. The decision to invade Afghanistan in the 1980, as well as the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster in 1986, precipitated its demise by the late 1980s. And in the early 1990s, it all fell apart.

Ukraine became an independent nation in 1991. For Ukrainians, it was a moment to celebrate because for three generations, the aspiration for our statehood was evident, but had been heavily suppressed. Nevertheless, our aspiration to be an independent nation remained and the collapse of the Soviet Union provided the opportunity for Ukraine to become independent.

Over the last 23 years, Russia, Ukraine and all the former Soviet colonies, now independent countries, have followed their own paths. Each has had its own problems with transitioning economies, the emergence of oligarchies, corruption and other issues common to traditional economies in transition.

However, since Vladimir Putin became a president of Russia, he has taken a different road. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a tragedy for him because, during the cold war, the Soviet Union was feared and, therefore, respected. He felt that Russia had lost that respect. Further, the Russian people had never understood how evil the empire had been and post the Soviet Union's demise, there has been no public examination of its legacy.

In fact, such an examination has been discouraged by President Putin, especially in the last 15 years. Stalin

has been revived as a ruthless, but justified, leader of the Soviet Union. This is quite bizarre, given that he was denounced by the Communist Party. The way he and his style have been resurrected reflects the aspiration to gain international respect, creating somebody whose example could be followed.

Following the Stalin example, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. The ease with which Russia occupied Georgian territory emboldened Putin, because the sanctions imposed on Russia were not strong enough. So, in 2014, Russia invaded Ukraine grabbing Crimea and parts of Ukraine's eastern provinces. The international reaction was not a deterrent to such adventurism. The United States government under President Obama tried to reset policy with Russia, but the initiative was altered under Donald Trump's presidency and ultimately failed.

When the Russians invaded metropolitan Ukraine, a tragedy for Australians was the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 on 17 July 2014. The Russians had brought a Buk 9M38 air defence system into Ukraine. They targeted a civilian aircraft that was passing through the territory of Ukraine and killed all 298 people on board, including 38 Australians. The Russians have to be held responsible and accountable for the crimes that they have committed. We already have the decisions of the courts in Netherlands, but we still need to make sure that Russians are held accountable.

Then, for eight years (2014 – 2022), we had a war with Russia in our eastern provinces, but it was a minor conflict. In the news, there was a lot about the war in the early days in 2014 and 2015; then it went quiet while the Russians focused on beefing up their military, allocating more money to their defence industry and preparing for that perfect moment when to come back and to invade Ukraine on a much greater scale.

The War Begins

Hence, when that moment came on the 24 February 2022, I was also among those who did not believe that the Russians would actually launch such a major offensive. We thought that they would try to capture more territory in the east. We did not expect them to come from three different directions – from the north, from the east and from the south. But they did.

For me, personally, I had to pack up my stuff, get my family in the car, and then try to leave the city. You can imagine 3.5 million people trying to leave the city at once and everybody getting stuck in a huge traffic jam. There was no petrol or diesel at the service stations. It was like in those Hollywood movies where they show an attack catastrophe and everybody is trying to escape. You felt like you were in some sort of blur; you could not think straight, because you could not believe that it was actually happening.

One of the most striking moments for me was when I took my family to western Ukraine where my parents live. We spent some time there. Then my family asked me if I could evacuate them outside of the country because they did not feel safe. My 4-year-old son got

really traumatised by the explosions he heard. My 18-year-old daughter was also in distress. I decided to take my family out. The border with Poland was extremely crowded and was difficult to get through. Then a friend of mine from Romania reached out to me so we picked Romania as the place for the family to go. I calculated probably the fastest way out was to get them to the border, have them cross the border on foot, and then have my friend meet them on the other side. I was to be left behind because I was in the middle of finalising my appointment to go to Australia. But I did not know if it would proceed, because nobody knew what was going to happen.

It was interesting when my family made it to Romania. My young son asked my wife: "Why are we in Romania?" My wife is also a student of international relations. She explained that Romania is part of NATO and the Russians will not invade Romania. So, we are in a safe place. Three weeks later, we all came to Australia and my son asked: "Is Australia part of NATO? Will the Russians invade?"

Progress in the War

I now want to describe what has happened militarily over the past two years, because it is important to look at the dynamics of what was happening and how we were able to withstand the Russian onslaught. Some people say it was a miracle; others believe that it was the bravery of the Ukrainian people that has helped us to withstand that brutal Russian attack.

Since 2022, we have been able to push the Russians out of 50 per cent of the territory they originally occupied. And as Russian troops were defeated on the outskirts of Kyiv, we have discovered massive war crimes and crimes against humanity that Russians have committed: rape, summary executions and torture; and later, we discovered that the abduction of Ukrainian children was happening on a massive scale. It was part of a strategy to terrorise the civilian population and make them abandon the resistance; a component of a much larger intimidation strategy. Once these heinous crimes were discovered and reported, the world community was shocked and reacted very strongly. And that was one of the reasons the international community has supported Ukraine, an underdog country that has been attacked.

The weapons platforms which were then made available to Ukraine – the tanks, the air defence systems, the artillery – all have made a difference on the battlefield. Some believe that we have been getting just enough to avoid defeat, but not enough to prevail. Whether true or not, this support has been vital, as we would not have been able to withstand the Russians without it. But, at the same time, some of the promised equipment has not come when most needed. Such delays have come at a high cost to the Ukrainians.

So far, we have been able to achieve major successes in the Black Sea by destroying nearly 50 per cent of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, even without having a navy of our own. We have been able to confine

the remaining Russian warships to the eastern part of the Black Sea and have cleared the way for the export of our food products through the western Black Sea.

Ukraine's counter offensive in the northern summer of 2023 did not go well, to be frank – for three different reasons. The Russians had about nine months before that to prepare. They were able to build three lines of defence, digging-in deeply. We did not have enough of the right tools such as mine-clearing equipment. But also, the minute you came within range of the Russian artillery, you just got hammered by intense artillery fire; and we did not have the firepower to counter it. We still do not have enough artillery and artillery ammunition. We hope to get more sometime in the next three months, as well as the right tools for such operations.

Nevertheless, the war has been underway for two years and four months now and we are still standing. That has been due to the unity of the Ukrainian people that I have been amazed by – the rest of the world has been amazed, too. And I have never seen anything of that sort in Ukraine's history. It has been truly the birth of a Ukrainian nation where everybody is united as a community. You may have seen the footage of farmers stealing Russian tanks with their tractors, or of disabled people making Molotov cocktails, or of the many volunteer groups who rallied together to supply food or other assistance to the people at the front. Ukrainian volunteers are still crowd-funding, globally, for drones or for any other equipment they can source.

Australian Support for Ukraine

Ukraine is extremely grateful for the support it has received from Australia. When I arrived in Australia in early April 2022 to present my diplomatic credentials to the then coalition government, I was really amazed by the swift reaction. Later, I was in the parliament building when President Zelenskyy addressed both chambers – he asked for help, specifically for Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles. The subsequent rapid provision of those vehicles, I am told, was probably one of the fastest responses to a request for military assistance in Australian history. It was morning in Ukraine when the president spoke; it was late afternoon here. And next day, when Prime Minister Scott Morrison was speaking to the media, he confirmed that those Bushmasters would be despatched. It was still the same day in Ukraine when the news broke that the Bushmasters would be coming.

Since then, the Bushmasters have become an icon of the Australian support to Ukraine. Before the war, when Ukrainians thought about Australia, they would use typical stereotypes, like kangaroos and koalas. But now Bushmaster as a brand is known in Ukraine as much as those unique animals. I have visited Ukraine seven times since my arrival here. Every time I have been in a taxi and have started a conversation, people have heard about connection to Australia. Invariably, the drivers ask about Bushmasters. A total of 120 Bushmasters have been supplied to Ukraine now, and they have saved many lives. The design has proved to be very effective

because of the way it protects the vehicle's underside from mines and provides battlefield protection for the movement of our personnel.

In June 2022, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visited Ukraine in only his fifth week in the job. I initially asked the Department of Foreign Affairs if there would be a chance for him to visit Ukraine as he was scheduled to attend the NATO summit in Madrid. The response was that it was unlikely, because he had only been in the job for a few weeks. I was very pleased when that decision was reversed. Five weeks later, I went to Ukraine with him. He spent one day there, but it was a very important day for him. He was taken to cities on the outskirts of Kyiv which had been liberated from the Russians only three months earlier. I was there with him when he was taken to a church at Bucha, where there was a mass burial of people who had been executed or killed. Even for me, who knew this story and had been retelling this story to the media, I was really shocked at what I heard. Once you have seen it and heard those witness accounts, you can never forget it. I was pleased that prime minister had been able to do this trip, and I am sure it had an impact on him.

The Russian Challenge in the Pacific

It remains important for Australia to continue supporting Ukraine. We need the support, firstly, because the Russians have dismantled the rules-based international system. The rules-based order is now gone because Russia, a nuclear power, has attacked a smaller neighbour.

It is important to remember that, in 1994, Ukraine voluntarily gave up its nuclear weapons. It was probably the biggest contribution to global peace at that time. Ukraine then had the third largest stockpile of nuclear weapons in the World. We can debate whether Ukraine was capable of maintaining those weapons. But we did make that contribution. We gave them up even though they had been transferred to us after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Some of our strategic bombers were dismantled. We signed up to a document called the Budapest Memorandum.

Under the Budapest Memorandum, Russia, as well as the United States, France and other countries, committed to assure us of our sovereignty and of our territorial integrity, which was blatantly violated by Russia in 2014. Then, eight years later, on a much greater scale, Russia in effect dismantled the post-World War II world order. Now, if Ukraine cannot be protected, who can be protected?

Sometimes I hear it said that Ukraine is a long way away from Australia. The war is something that is happening in Europe and Europe probably has to deal with it. But we have to keep it in mind that it is not about Ukraine; it is about Russia. Because Russia is a Pacific country, it is actually much closer to Australia than people think. As a Pacific nation, if Russia is successful in Ukraine, it will be more emboldened to assert itself in the Pacific. Russia maintains a large Pacific navy with over 260 warships and 24 submarines, including some

nuclear submarines, as well as about 100 aircraft in their Vladivostok base.

We have recently observed intense co-operation between Russia and North Korea. During Putin's visit to North Korea in June 2024, he concluded a security agreement. That was a wake-up call for Australia, because Russia is demonstrating that it is interested in disrupting the Pacific as well. I think the biggest problem here is maritime security and free navigation of the sea with the potential to disrupt Australia's trading partners, Japan and South Korea.

So, there is a great deal at stake for Australia in making sure that Ukraine can win its war with Russia. Whatever happens in eastern Europe will have implications for the Pacific region. There are not two Russias; just one Russia. Not one Russia, invading a neighbour in Europe, and a very friendly Russia here in the Pacific. It is the same Russia. And we see from that co-operation with North Korea how closely it is done.

Allegedly, the North Koreans have supplied Russia with 5 million rounds of artillery ammunition and some ballistic missiles that already have been used against Ukraine. We do not know, however, what the Russians are providing in return, including technical expertise, to help North Korea to further its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. But we already see an embolden Russia, which is undermining global and regional security. So, Ukraine is fighting for freedom, for human rights and for rule of law.

International Problems Created by the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created massive problems internationally. One of the most acute problems is food security. Ukraine is one of the biggest producers of food. Globally, we produce 10 per cent of the global output of wheat, 17 per cent of barley and 50 per cent of the sunflower oil. Many countries in the Middle East and Africa depend on the supply of food from Ukraine.

Initially, when the Russians invaded Ukraine, we were prevented from exporting food, which created food shortages and saw the price of food rise. This led to starvation in the eastern parts of Africa and in many countries dependent on Ukrainian food. Even in Australia the price of vegetable oil went up. A major reason for that was our inability to export our sunflower oil to global markets. We have also seen an increased price for energy resources.

Further, there has been a major increase in the priority different governments place on national security. In many nations, especially ones with large populations, the price of food and the price of energy, is a very sensitive issue. For instance, for a country like Indonesia which has 275 million people, the price of oil and food is very sensitive. A lot of food was coming from Ukraine to Indonesia. So, for Indonesia and other affected countries with large populations, the sooner this war can end, the sooner we will be able to restore properly functioning global commodity markets.

Australia has benefited inadvertently from this war with rising prices for food and commodities. A major reason for the budget surplus in Australia last year was the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The surplus was driven by the high prices for gas, iron ore and wheat. We have seen the same for oil prices. I think that is an additional reason why Australia should do more to support Ukraine at the moment, given what is at stake.

The Cost of the War to Ukraine

The cost of this war is extremely high. We now estimate that, to date, we have had 300,000 people killed and, 3000 people with disabilities caused by the war. We have over 5 million people who are now displaced in Europe, and these are primarily women with children. Another 7 million have been internally displaced. We now estimate that 25 per cent of Ukrainian territory is mined and clearing that territory of mines will take a long time.

There has been a huge impact on the Ukrainian environment. Toxic chemicals have polluted our soil and water. The deliberate destruction by Russia of the large Kakhovka Dam and hydropower station on 6 June 2023 created a catastrophe in the southern part of Ukraine by flooding many hectares of the country. The floodwaters hit many fertilizer storage places and landfills downstream and polluted large parts of southern Ukraine, including part of our agricultural land. Our Ukrainian national parks are mostly destroyed. The environmental catastrophe is ongoing.

Most importantly, the war has had a huge impact on the people of Ukraine. The trauma of war is impacting the society, although the society still remains resilient. But as the war drags on and the more destruction we see, the more difficult it becomes. While I been in Australia now for over two years, I have been able to return to Ukraine briefly on seven occasions. On these visits home, it was very important for me to understand what was happening on the ground, to assess the public sentiment and to grasp its evolution. When I was there in January, I saw a change of mood as to how people were reacting. Most Ukrainian social media now provide obituaries and the first thing most Ukrainians do when they wake up each morning is to scan the list of obituaries on their phones. They read about their relatives, their friends, or their friends close friends, or somebody they knew who were either wounded or killed on the front lines. It has been ongoing now for such a long time that the issue of mental trauma will be one of the key issues for us to deal with for a long time to come.

The Russians also have been trying to destroy our power generation and electricity distribution systems. According to the international conventions of war, that is a war crime. It has been ongoing now for two and a half years, and they have largely destroyed three of the major elements of our energy infrastructure. Their main goal is to put pressure on Ukraine's civilian population with a view to the population pressuring the government to stop resisting the Russian invasion. There are regular blackouts now in many cities. This has had a major

impact on Ukraine's economy. While industry tries to function despite those blackouts, it is difficult to run your business without a supply of electricity.

Ending the Conflict through Diplomacy

Ukraine still believes there is a chance to end the conflict through diplomacy. To that end, Ukraine convened a major international peace summit in Switzerland on 15-16 June 2024, with a view to renewing trust in international law and the United Nations Charter. Ukraine invited 160 countries to participate. Russia, however, was not invited.

Some 101 delegates took part, representing over 90 countries and key international organisations. The countries represented included ones from each of the five continents and many from the Global South. We wanted to demonstrate to Russia that there are issues involved which are very important globally and that Ukraine has strong global support.

The meeting focused on three themes: food security; nuclear and radiation safety; and humanitarian issues related to the exchange of the prisoners of war and return of the abducted Ukrainian children.

Nuclear safety is a priority for us. The Russians have held hostage Europe's largest nuclear power plant, which is in Ukraine. There is a high chance anything could happen to that power plant, including it going into meltdown. That would be a catastrophe, not only for Ukraine, but also for large parts of Europe. It was important for us to emphasise to Russia that it is inadmissible for them to use nuclear blackmail as a way to threaten us. So, there was a call to Russia to stop doing it.

Conclusion

I have covered lots of ground in explaining the Russo-Ukrainian War from a Ukrainian perspective. Ukraine has been able to resist Russia's aggression to date, but the war is ongoing and we will continue to need international assistance, including from Australia.

The Author: Vasyl Myroshnychenk became ambassador of Ukraine to Australia on 1 April 2022, after having served briefly as an adviser to Ukraine's Minister of Defence just prior to his appointment. Before that, he had served as a member of the supervisory board of the Ukrainian Institute, a cultural diplomacy arm of Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Prior to joining the foreign service, he was an active business and civil society leader in Ukraine; a partner of a Kiev-based strategic communications company; and co-founder, chairman and board member of various non-government organisations which amplified Ukraine's voice internationally and mobilised support for economic, legal and judicial reforms in Ukraine. [Photo of Mr Myroshnychenk: Lieutenant Colonel John Howells OAM RFD (Ret'd)]

