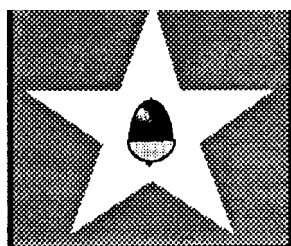


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# Lviv Air Show Tragedy

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## Lviv Air Show Tragedy

James Sherr

The crash of a Su-27B at an air show in Lviv on 27 July with a loss of 84 lives<sup>1</sup> has already had three significant consequences. It has damaged confidence in the Armed Forces. It has sharpened resentments against 'the system' and Ukraine's president and, more significantly, has provoked the Armed Forces to express such resentments themselves. Most important, it has convinced the authorities that they will be held to their commitment (undertaken coincidentally on 26 July) to secure a 'radical' increase in the country's defence budget for 2003.

The tragedy at Sknyliv airfield follows by only nine months the accidental downing of a Russian Tu-154 airliner (October 2001), which resulted in the dismissal of Ukraine's Defence Minister, Army General Oleksandr Kuzmuk, and it comes scarcely one year after a *Tochka-U* missile struck a block of flats in Brovary (April 2000). On 27 July President Kuchma established a State Commission to investigate the causes of the disaster under Yevhen Marchuk, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council. Simultaneously, he dismissed the Commander of Ukraine's Air Forces (VPS),<sup>2</sup> Colonel General Viktor Strelnykov and on the following day dismissed the CGS, Colonel General Petro Shulyak, who was performing the Minister's duties on 27 July, owing to the absence on leave of Ukraine's Minister of Defence, Army General Volodymyr Shkidchenko.<sup>3</sup> On 28 July Ukraine's Prosecutor General, Svyatoslav Piskun, a firm Kuchma loyalist, ordered the detention of Strelnykov and three other senior military officers in order to prevent them from 'hampering' the investigation and 'giving unnecessary orders'.

Already it is clear that the effects of the dismissals and detentions have been very different from those intended. On 30 July, the leaders of Ukraine's four opposition blocs (Viktor Yushchenko, Yulia Tymoshenko, Oleksandr Moroz and Petro Symonenko) issued a joint statement declaring that the 'responsibility for such tragedies lies with the system at the top of which is the individual [Kuchma] who is not tackling state problems but is instead busy protecting the interests of the clans close to him and strengthening his personal power'. On the same day, these sentiments were echoed by the parliamentary newspaper, *Holos Ukrainiy* [Voice of Ukraine], which declared that the 'issue is not surnames here, but the ability of these people [the state authorities] to straighten out the "tilt" which has accompanied our planes for many years now'.

More surprisingly, the measures instituted by Kuchma and Piskun have provoked an unusually assertive reaction from the Armed Forces, an

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institution known for deference to presidential authority. The former Minister of Defence, Oleksandr Kuzmuk, currently Military Adviser to the President, declared that Ukraine possessed very few senior commanders with the competence of Shulyak and Strelnykov and warned, given the present state of the forces, that personnel changes could have ‘damaging and permanent consequences’. Strelnykov himself had warned late last year that the Air Forces were in a dangerously parlous state owing to chronic underfunding and the absence of adequate provision for training<sup>4</sup> – a warning recently reiterated by the military safety inspector of the MOD, Major General Yuriy Barakhin. Borys Korotkov, Deputy Air Forces Commander with responsibility for educational work, stated that Strelnykov himself ‘was in an air disaster, and his decency and courage are well known not just within the military’. Deputy Commander of 5 Air Corps, Serhiy Tronko, who was at Strelnykov’s side throughout the air show, publicly itemised the sequence of measures taken by the latter to ensure that aircraft remained over the runway and away from spectators. On 30 July officers and generals of the VPS publicly appealed to Kuchma to release Strelnykov from custody. The tendency of commanders to speak openly and sharply – both before the episode and after it – does not contradict Shkidchenko’s verdict that ‘there is guilt on the part of the Armed forces’. But it does indicate mounting resentment in the forces, as well as apprehension that the authorities will use the tragedy to scapegoat the ‘criminal negligence’ of the military and deflect attention from their own.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the outspokenness of the military appears to have thrown the President off balance. Whilst seeking to regain the initiative by castigating the ‘irresponsibility’ of diverting scarce budget funds to ‘entertainments’ rather than ‘improving the military’s combat skills and their living conditions’, he has also moved to reclaim the high ground by asserting what the military would scarcely dispute: that the real culprit is underfinancing and ‘incomplete military reform ... It is because this huge and complex work is not complete that the recent tragedies have been possible’.

In the midst of this acrimonious atmosphere, Marchuk’s State Commission has been conducting its work methodically and without bias. Marchuk is explicit that the purpose of his commission is to establish the causes of the tragedy and not ‘who is responsible’. The three sub-commissions (investigating, respectively, the piloting of the aircraft, the technical performance of the aircraft and the performance of organisations and staffs) have already come to three preliminary conclusions:

- The technical performance of the aircraft was not at fault;
- The two pilots significantly deviated from their ‘mission’ (orders establishing procedures and flight paths);
- The principal flaws, as with the downing of the Tu-154, lie at the level of ‘general organisation’: ‘blank spaces in the control of the armed forces and the system of informing superior commanders’ (absence of training on site, substitution of the training aircraft by another on the day of the

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show, failure by VPS headquarters in Vinnytsya to inform the MOD Kyiv of the exercise plan, let alone the fact that combat aircraft would be used) and a 'problem of relations between military and civil authorities' (failure of Lviv authorities to understand their responsibilities before and after they gave permission to the Air Forces to hold the air show).

## Conclusion

The Lviv tragedy is likely to do greater damage to the reputation of Ukraine's President than its Armed Forces, and it is almost certain to deepen an already ugly succession struggle. Defence reform, a long-standing national imperative, has also been a long-standing political orphan in Ukraine. It is now becoming a salient political issue and, for better or worse, it is set to become a field of political struggle.

For reasons of political as well as national interest, Marchuk is poised to use the Lviv tragedy to fortify his own authority by means of securing proper funding for Ukraine's defence reform and implementing the 'very difficult' decision taken by the NSDC on 26 July to increase the 2003 defence budget from UAH 3.2 bn (\$640 mn) to 'over' UAH 3.6 bn (\$700 + mn).<sup>6</sup> Interestingly this represents a far more modest increment than that referred to by Kuchma, who dramatically stated on 1 August that he has 'instructed the government to ensure almost a double increase in funding for the Army and Navy from next year' [*sic* – no mention of VPS]. As Marchuk would be the first to appreciate, even the more modest NSDC commitment, if realised, would provide some welcome substance to the NSDC's 23 May declaration identifying NATO membership as Ukraine's long-term goal – a declaration which, to a significant degree, is the brainchild of Marchuk himself. Although Marchuk has been circumspect in stating 'who is responsible', he wants no one to doubt that chronic underfinancing of the Armed Forces 'is the ideological reason for all these events'.

Radical change is imperative. Either more money has to be taken away from the economy [for the Armed Forces] or the army reform has to be accelerated in structure and in quantity. There are such programmes<sup>7</sup> but it is clear now that they have to be significantly stepped up, and we have to say openly and honestly: we can afford to finance this, but we cannot afford to finance that.<sup>8</sup>

This has been the refrain of Ukraine's most respected independent analysts since 1999. If it finally becomes a basis for action, then the consequences of this latest military tragedy will not be entirely tragic for Ukraine.

ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This is the total as of 4 August. Amongst over 70 wounded survivors, the condition of six to nine is described as 'serious' and three as 'grave'.

<sup>2</sup> *Viyskovo-Povitriani Syly*.

<sup>3</sup> Shkidchenko immediately submitted a letter of resignation, which Kuchma rejected on 28 July.

<sup>4</sup> 'In 2001, despite a reduction in planned tasks for combat training, only 15% were fulfilled. On the assumption that material support remains at the same level in 2002, the Ukrainian Air Force could lose its remaining combat potential. At present, we simply cannot speak about improvements in training, whilst we are unable to renew our pilots' skills, including those of our formerly well prepared top-level specialists'.

<sup>5</sup> The level of resentment and apprehension is evident in Strelnikov's comment on 31 July: 'Considering the way the Ukrainian Air Forces are provided for at the moment, I believe personally that I will not be in charge of the Air Forces any more. Even if they ask me to. Don't ask me to - I won't'.

<sup>6</sup> It is significant that Prime Minister Anatoliy Kinakh attended this meeting as well as President Kuchma. The Cabinet of Ministers has invariably resisted increases in defence expenditure.

<sup>7</sup> Principally, the State Programme of Armed Forces Reform 2001-5, the Concept of the Armed Forces 2010, the State Programme of Armed Forces Transition Towards Manning on a Contract Basis and the Draft Programme for Development of Arms and Military Hardware to 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with ICTV television, Kyiv, 1 August 2002.

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