

# Ukraine's Territorial Defence Force War Creates Defiance

*Ismail Khan*

AS RUSSIA ESCALATED its troop presence near Ukraine's border in winter 2021, images of Ukrainian citizens training with wooden guns in Kyiv's snowy suburbs generated comments on social media. Western politico-military analysts questioned the utility of arming civilian volunteers, as part of Ukraine's newly activated Territorial Defence Force (TDF), against the regular Russian army. Many anticipated that the TDF's task could only involve insurgency and partisan warfare once a swift Russian military incursion had decapitated the political leadership. Their real role was soon to become something more momentous than just static territorial defence.

This brief examines the role that the Ukrainian TDF actually played following Russia's full-scale invasion, in 2022 – how they emerged, grew and ultimately proved their mettle from 2022. The analysis builds on a chapter in a recent FOI report, *Russia's War against Ukraine: The First Year*, which examined how the Ukrainian society had changed in the eight years since the war first began, in 2014. Volunteer armed formations financed by civil society came to play an important role, since state institutions, both during and following the Euromaidan, in 2014, were weak. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and ensuing aggression in eastern Ukraine underscored the need for volunteer forces.

## The Territorial Defence Force Emerges

The embryo of today's TDF was discernible following Russia's initial aggression, a move intended to foment separatism, in eastern Ukraine. The Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) initially managed to repel Russian-backed separatists, but faced difficulties when regular Russian army formations intervened in late 2014 and early 2015. During this period, Ukraine's civil society became unofficial providers of security and logistics in areas where the state was fragile. The AFU relied heavily on volunteer armed units. These units performed well in combat engagements and were later integrated into regular AFU structures.

The war in Donbas (2014–2022) led to a major overhaul of Ukraine's defence and provided several benefits. The first concerns reforms that among other things included training from military advisors from the Baltic States and that developed the AFU in line with NATO standards. The second involved a force-level effect, notably in the large number of reserves comprised of combat veterans with experience in volunteer units that had rotated in combat engagements in the east.

The first Russian military buildup, in April 2021, coupled with the 2020 deadlock in the Minsk negotiations, caused significant concern in Ukraine and ultimately resulted in increasing the pace of Ukraine's westward foreign- and security-policy orientation. This led to a new *Military Security Strategy*, adopted in March 2021, which underscored the importance of establishing a national territorial defence. To further draw on the advantages of the large pool of reserves and solidify the resilience Ukraine had been building since 2014, the law, "On Fundamentals of National Resistance," enacted in June 2021, echoed the importance that the Military Security Strategy ascribed to constructing a territorial defence.

While the first six months of 2021 established the organisational baseline of the TDF, it was not until January 2022 that the law to activate the TDF as a standalone branch of the AFU took effect. At that time, Ukraine's politico-military leadership did not consider that a full-scale invasion stood out as the most likely scenario.

## The Threat of a Russian Invasion

The delay, from June 2021 to January 2022, in expanding the TDF likely remains attributable to President Zelenskyi's valid, but unsustainable, expectation of relying on the Minsk agreements to resolve the low-intensity conflict in Donbas. Another explanation for the delay may in fact be far simpler: Russia's decade-long war against Ukraine forced Kyiv to balance its immediate military needs with the long-term financial support required for expanding the TDF. When the law

on reinforcing national resistance was activated on 1 January 2022, the situation had rapidly become acute. In its second build-up, Russia had amassed a major troop presence near the border. Legal changes introduced by Ukraine allowed citizens to join the TDF by simply showing their ID cards, facilitating its rapid growth. The speed at which the TDF was activated meant the creation of many bureaucratic and administrative obstacles, as well as difficulties in securing training bases and acquiring the means necessary to attain a sufficient level of combat readiness for its personnel. There were also challenges, when creating command and operational structures, in integrating the TDF as a standalone branch of the AFU. On 26 February 2022, TDF brigades engaged 50,000 people. In May the same year, this force had grown to 110,000.

### Proving Their Resolve in High-Intensity Combat

The fact that Russia chose to launch a full-scale invasion forced Ukraine to amass and deploy large numbers of troops over its vast territory. In high-intensity battles in and around Kyiv in March–April 2022, the TDF contributed significantly to slowing down and forcing Russia to change its operational advance. The TDF, consisting of persons from all walks of life, from Kyiv-based lawyers to café owners and accountants armed with man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), were among those who prevented elite Russian paratroopers from establishing an air bridge during their attempted airborne assault on Antonov International Airport, a 30-minute drive away from downtown Kyiv. In Chernihiv, for example, a retired army captain, now a postal worker, shot down a Russian SU-34 with a MANPAD only a few days after joining the TDF. The TDF played an equally critical role when it defended settlements in the Sumy region, 90 km north of Kharkiv and close to the Russian border, in early spring 2022. Several AFU contingents had previously relocated to pre-established defensive positions in eastern Ukraine, anticipating a Russian incursion from Donbas. Of 400 TDF soldiers who had been left to defend their settlements, which had been encircled for almost six weeks, only 20 had received prior military experience; the TDF nevertheless destroyed Russian military equipment and mounted significant resistance. Operating with little or no guidance from Kyiv, they

created chokepoints that disrupted the flow of Russian logistics from the border to Kyiv. Their actions contributed to Russia's collapse as it withdrew its forces from northern Ukraine in April 2022. In Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson in autumn 2022, the TDF also eventually played more of an important augmenting role for the AFU.

In 2023, the TDF performed other roles in addition to supporting the functions of the AFU in high-intensity combat in urban areas. It gathered intelligence and guarded checkpoints outside cities. The TDF is also remaining active in Russian-occupied areas, conducting a range of guerrilla activities, from sabotage to targeted assassinations. As the nature of the war changes, and following the Russian withdrawal from northern Ukraine, legislative changes in May 2023 enabled TDF brigades from a variety of urban centres to redeploy to southeastern Ukraine and integrate more deeply with the AFU during its counteroffensives that commenced in late summer 2023. However, military analysts question the utility of deploying light infantry composed mainly of volunteers in combat environments involving frontal assaults through layered minefields. This is instead of utilizing them in the rear.

To conclude, few expected Ukraine to mount an effective defence against a full-scale Russian invasion. As it happens, Ukraine's will to fight and its societal resilience, as well as the existence of a competent and sizeable reserve, has enabled it to fight for 18 months; it has also forced Russia to change its operational plan as it advanced into northern Ukraine. From 2014 onwards, Ukraine closely aligned to EU and NATO, while most Ukrainians developed a strong sense of Ukrainian national identity. Its political and military consolidation has created the necessary preconditions for Ukraine's resistance. Lessons from the ongoing war in Ukraine underscore the significance of a reserve force that is allowed into the core of armed resistance. The TDF's combat capability, especially, displayed the flexibility they added to overall warfighting. In this context, the TDF, despite its delayed inception, became an illustration of Ukraine's resilience and adaptability. They provided additional resources for the AFU and bolstered Ukraine's overall defence in a war where quantity and staying power had come to the fore. ■

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This brief is based on the chapter, "Consolidating Ukraine 2014–2021," for the FOI report, *Russia's War Against Ukraine and the West: The First Year*. The entire report may be obtained from [www.foi.se](http://www.foi.se) or via the following QR code:

