

Wars Tend to Bury Facts: The Polish Missile Narrative

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Wars tend to bury facts. What comes out of them is often a furiously untidy mix of accounts that, when considered later, constitute wisps of fantasy and presumption. Rarely accepted in the heat of battle is the concept of mistake: that a weapon was wrongly discharged or errantly hit an unintended target; a deployment that went awry; or that the general was drunk when an order was given. Wars invite ludicrous tall tales and lies with sprinting legs.

In the Ukraine War, where accurate information has almost ceased to be relevant (unless you believe the sludge from any one side), the latest shock and shudder came in the form of a missile that fell on Polish territory. As a result, two farmers lost their lives in the village of Przewodów.

The farmers, as the pencilled in victims of a broader power play, almost ceased to be relevant. Discussions moved on to a potential violation of Polish territory and the prospect of NATO engagement. The missile had been "Russian-made", which tickled those keen to push a widening of the conflict. Never mind that Ukraine has its own share of Russian and Soviet-era weapons systems.

The Ukrainian side, ever keen to bring in more military assistance against Moscow, was clear from the outset: it could not have been from their side.

"Russia now promotes a conspiracy theory that it was allegedly a missile of Ukrainian air defense that fell on the Polish territory [sic]," [raged](#) the country's Foreign Affairs Minister Dmytro Kuleba. "Which is not true. No one should buy Russian propaganda or amplify its messages. This lesson should have been long learnt since the downing of #MH17."

The Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, was also keen to capitalise. There was little doubt, [in his mind](#), who was responsible. It could never be a Ukrainian missile battery; never be a deflection arising from the aerial tussle of projectiles.

"I have no doubt that this was not our missile," he mentioned in televised remarks. "I believe that this was a Russian missile based on our military reports."

Then came [a slight qualification](#), if only one phrased in a typically non-qualified manner.

"Let's say openly, if, God forbid, some remnant (of Ukraine's air-defences) killed a person, these people, then we need to apologise. But first there needs to be a probe, access – we want to get the data you have."

But even Ukraine's allies and sponsors found this a bit salty and impulsive. Yes, there was much theatre in rushed emergency meetings as the G20 summit broke into a G7 conclave, but a brake seemed to have been brought to bear. The NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was left [having to explain](#) that the missile was unlikely to have been fired from Russian territory. The Russian denial of direct responsibility might well be disliked, but it was probably true. Mistake or not, however, the guilty party for all and sundry was clear: the Polish missile strike was "likely caused by Ukraine but not Ukraine's fault".

Poland's own leaders also began to release statements suggesting that this was not, in fact, a missile released from Russian territory. Poland's President Andrzej Duda made [an unreserved observation](#).

"From the information that we and our allies have, it was a S-300 rocket made in the Soviet Union, an old rocket and there is no evidence that it was launched by the Russian side."

He also [conceded](#) that the missile may have fallen on Polish territory in the course of Ukraine "launching their missiles in various directions". There was "nothing, absolutely nothing, to suggest that it was an intentional attack on Poland."

Knowing the political sensitivity of it all, especially if it might cast a poor light on Ukraine's heroism, he preferred to rationalise the mistake. Had Russia not attacked Ukraine and initiated the war, there would have been no reason to fire the deviant missile in the first place. The law of causality dictated its dark tune, and things followed. Moscow [bore](#) "the ultimate responsibility, because this would not have happened hadn't Russia waged a brutal war of aggression against Ukraine."

The US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, [went even further](#), happy to not bother about what she dismissively called the "facts". Such circumstances would "never have happened but for Russia's needless invasion of Ukraine and its recent missile assaults against Ukraine's civilian infrastructure. The UN Charter is clear. Ukraine has every right to defend itself against this barrage."

The US National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson [also added](#) to the argument that, even if the lethal result had been from a Ukrainian launch, it was all in the course of self-defence.

"[W]hatever the final conclusions may be, it is clear that the party ultimately responsible for this tragic incident is Russia, which launched a barrage of missiles on Ukraine specifically intended to target civilian infrastructure. Ukraine had – and has – every right to defend itself."

The only question now remains how the next misfiring goes. On this occasion, the reins were pulled just before the precipice. Facts or no fact, NATO did not want to be engaged – at least for now. Poland, despite its past bravura to get a hack at the Russian bear, kept a sense of troubled composure. Ukrainian officials, however, wished to push the matter further, egging on a NATO trigger for deeper, military commitment. The grounds for a further expansion of the war are evident; the powder keg is ready.

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Featured image: "Brotherly friends": Ukrainian President Zelensky (R) and visiting Polish President Andrzej Duda, Kiev, May 22, 2022

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