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#1a

Russia Starts Delivering Missile Systems To Iran

RFE/RL, December 3, 2015

Russia has begun delivering S-300 air defense missile systems to Iran.

The announcement was made on December 3 by the arms trade adviser to President Vladimir Putin.

However, Vladimir Kozhin did not disclose any details in comments quoted by Russia's TASS news agency.

Russia in 2010 froze a deal to supply advanced long-range S-300 missile systems to Iran, linking the decision to UN sanctions.

Putin lifted the suspension earlier this year following Iran's deal with six world powers to curb its nuclear program in exchange for relief from international sanctions.

Last month, officials said that Russia and Iran finalized the contract for their delivery.

The S-300 deal has long worried Israel and other countries in the region, as well as the United States, which see it as destabilizing.

#1b

Putin Promises To Deliver More Power In Visit To Crimea

RFE/RL, December 3, 2015

Russian President Vladimir Putin promised to deliver new electricity supplies to power-short Crimea in a surprise visit to the disputed territory on December 2.

Putin attended a ceremony to launch an undersea cable project that he called an "energy bridge" bringing a new supply of power to the Black Sea peninsula, which gets most of its electricity from Ukraine.

He also vowed that Russia will help make Crimea more energy independent by 2018.

"In 2017-2018, its own [power output] will be larger than that received from Ukraine," Putin said.

The territory's two million residents have been beset by power cuts since Crimea's four main pylons in Ukraine were blown up late last month. No one has claimed responsibility for the sabotage.

Russian and Crimean authorities blame Ukraine for the outages, but Kyiv insists it does not know what caused the explosions.

Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 from Ukraine after a popular revolt overthrew the pro-Moscow government in Kyiv and installed pro-Western leaders.

Putin "went to Simferopol where he inaugurated the first phase of the energy bridge that will provide Crimea's power supply from Russia," Crimea's deputy Prime Minister Ruslan Balbek said.

"The first electricity line should have been operational on December 20, but the works have been speeded up... It is a historic day for Crimea, which has won its energy independence from Ukraine," he said.

The electricity cables linking Russia to Crimea are now expected to be up and running on December 15, Balbek said.

Putin meanwhile warned residents of Crimea that "there may still be some problems."

"I hope the second phase will be launched soon," he said. "The work is far from done but I am convinced that everything will be done on time."

#1c

Thousands Rally In Armenia Against Plan To Change Constitution RFE/RL, December 1, 2015

At least 3,000 protesters have rallied in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, against proposed constitutional reforms they say could extend President Serzh Sarkisian's hold on power.

The demonstration, which was organized by the New Armenia opposition movement, began on the central Freedom Square on December 1.

Protesters then marched down large streets before returning to Liberty Square, shouting slogans and holding signs demanding that Sarkisian step down.

Demonstrators also waved Armenian flags and demanded that new presidential and parliamentary elections be held.

Protest leaders said they would continue their demonstration until their demands were met.

The protest comes ahead of a December 6 referendum on Sarkisian's proposal to change the constitution to make Armenia a parliamentary democracy where the prime minister, not the president, holds power.

Opposition forces say the changes are aimed at allowing Sarkisian to continue in power after his second and final term ends in 2018.

Sarkisian has denied plans to hold office after serving as president.

Speaking to the crowd at Freedom Square, opposition leader Raffi Hovannisyan said that "this government is counting its last days."

#1d

Turkey, Azerbaijan Agree To Speed Up Gas Pipeline Project RFE/RL, December 3, 2015

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has said Ankara and Baku have agreed to accelerate the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline project (TANAP).

Speaking in the Azerbaijani capital on December 3, Davutoglu said the aim was to have the gas project completed before the planned 2018.

TANAP is the central link in the EU-backed Southern Gas Corridor, a network of existing and planned pipelines designed to diversify Caspian energy export routes and reduce European dependence on Russian gas.

Estimated to cost \$10 billion, TANAP will tie into the existing South Caucasus pipeline that already supplies Azerbaijani gas to Georgia and east Turkey, and transport gas over a distance of 1,850 kilometers to Turkey's western border with the EU.

From there, gas is expected to enter the planned Trans-Adriatic Pipeline crossing Greece and Albania to Italy.

#1e

**Belarus Seeks \$3 Billion Loan From the IMF
AP, December 1, 2015**

Belarus said Tuesday it is seeking a \$3 billion loan for 10 years from the International Monetary Fund and is considering some economic reforms in return.

President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, said at a government meeting that an IMF loan offered better value than any alternative, including a deal with close ally Russia.

Lukashenko said that in talks with the IMF, he was open to a range of reforms, although details remain unclear.

"I didn't say no to them on any point. Not on the tariffs, not on the pension age, not on wages," he said. Raising the pension age — currently 60 for men and 55 for women — would require public consultations, he added.

That comes less than a month after Lukashenko rejected calls for structural economic reforms during his swearing-in ceremony. That would mean "smashing the political system, the entire government of Belarus," he had said at the time.

Prime Minister Andrei Kobyakov said that the IMF loan could have an interest rate of 2.28 percent.

An IMF delegation visited Belarus on Nov. 9-20 for talks with the government. The IMF said at the end of the visit that the negotiations made "considerable progress in discussing a set of policies" to underpin a three-year program under the IMF's extended fund facility.

Belarus is struggling economically, with GDP down 3.7 percent in the first nine months of 2015. Belarus took a \$3.5 billion IMF loan in 2009-10 and had a foreign debt of \$12.5 billion as of the start of last month.

About 80 percent of the country's economy remains in government hands, as Lukashenko has preserved a Soviet-style economy thanks to cheap Russian gas and Western loans.

#1f

**'Kosher Russia' Party Ready to Hit Parliamentary Elections
Jewish Press News, November 30, 2015**

Russia's political party which used to be called the Urbanites' Union will be officially renamed "Kosher Russia" and plans to participate in future elections under the slogans: "We are Russians Together and this is our Place to Live," the newly-elected chairman of the party's central council, and director of the Political Sociology Institute, Vyacheslav Smirnov, told TASS. Then TASS asked and the Federation of Russia's Jewish Communities told them they saw nothing insulting about this initiative.

According to Smirnov, 20% of the party candidates will be Jews — and he hopes they can attract 10% of the Russian voters.

Smirnov said the decision in favor of rebranding the party and his own appointment as its leader happened at last week's congress. He explained that Kosher Russia will not be "a party of one leader or of one name," but "a party of ideology and a party of image." He explained that Russia's legislation prohibited the creation of parties on the basis of religious or ethnic principles, Tass reported.

"The ideology [of the new party] will be an ideology of Russian cosmopolitanism: for the simple reason that we all live in Russia and everything and everybody here should be Russian — Russian Jews, Russian Armenians and Russian Slavs," Smirnov said.

The term "cosmopolitanism" used to be code for "Jewish" in the old Russian Communist party's culture.

He explained his vision of the national idea: all those living in Russia are obliged to observe the rules and laws common to all. As far as cosmopolitanism is concerned, "it should be understood as a broad look at European values and the understanding that we are part of the European civilization."

Smirnov said all the papers for the party's re-registration under its new identity had been finalized. They will be submitted to the Justice Ministry sometime in April. The party hopes to propose its list of candidates in single mandate constituencies even where their chances to succeed are limited. That will probably include all of them.

"It's going to be a positive campaign and a positive list of candidates — an international one. The election watchwords will be simple: Kosher Russia — Yes, Surely! Strong Russia — Kosher Russia, We are to Live Here and We are Russians Together," Smirnov said.

"In the Hebrew language 'kosher' means 'right, permissible and decent.' Those who proposed this brand hardly know that," the spokesman for the Federation of Russia's Jewish Communities, Boruch Gorin, told TASS. At the same time he agreed that eccentric moves in politics existed at all times, and this particular case was no exception. "I don't see any reason why anyone should get angry about this name. It does not insult my religious feelings," he said.

#2

U.S. Vice President To Address Ukrainian Parliament

By Mike Eckel

RFE/RL, December 2, 2015

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden will address Ukraine's parliament next week during a visit U.S. officials say is aimed at showing Ukraine -- and Russia -- Washington's continued support for Kyiv.

A senior U.S. administration official said on December 2 that in his address to the Verkhovna Rada, Biden would reiterate U.S. opposition to Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and support for Ukraine's debt-restructuring agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international lenders, the official said.

The December 8 speech will be preceded by talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, officials said.

Biden is the highest-ranking U.S. official to speak before the Ukrainian parliament since U.S. President George H.W. Bush in 1991, during the waning days of the Soviet Union.

Biden has visited Ukraine four times since peaceful protests began in the streets of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, in November 2013 over a proposed deal between Ukraine and the European Union. Those protests morphed

into violent clashes and culminated in February 2014 with then-President Viktor Yanukovich fleeing the country.

Open fighting in eastern Ukraine has ebbed in recent months, after the signing of the Minsk cease-fire accords, though there are daily reports of mortar fire and exchange of fire in regions surrounding the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk.

U.S. and European officials say Russia, and the separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, continue to violate the Minsk accords. Moscow, for its part, has accused Ukrainian security forces of violations, and says Poroshenko's government is not moving fast enough to implement some of the accord's provisions, like local elections.

Biden's visit comes just days after U.S. President Barack Obama signed new defense-policy legislation for 2015 that includes \$300 million in aid and equipment for Ukraine. Of that figure, Congress earmarked \$50 million for lethal weaponry, something Ukraine has been requesting for months now.

However, the White House has said no lethal weaponry -- things like antiarmor weapon systems, mortars, "crew-served weapons and ammunition," grenade launchers and ammunition, and small arms and ammunition -- would be forthcoming.

Administration officials told reporters on December 2 that the United States has provided around \$450 million in assistance over the past two years, about half of which included security equipment such as body armor, Humvees, and communication equipment.

Last month, Ukraine took delivery of counterbattery radars, which help troops defend against artillery attacks. John Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, said up to 80 percent of Ukraine's casualties in the fighting have come from artillery fire.

The Kremlin, meanwhile, has continued to telegraph its intentions should any lethal weaponry be delivered.

"Given the fact that the hostilities have ceased and cases of shelling are rare, it is unclear why would the U.S. Congress adopt resolutions making it possible to provide Ukraine with lethal weapons," Russian President Vladimir Putin was quoted as telling the Interfax news agency on November 13, three days after the defense-policy legislation got final congressional approval.

"The question arises as to whether there is a desire to spark a war or provoke hostilities," Putin said.

Administration officials have tried to emphasize that while no lethal weaponry was forthcoming, the assistance included more funding for training regular armed force units, something that the Defense Department began last week.

"What would be a game-changer is fundamental reform of the Ukraine security sector and institutional quality of their armed forces because that's frankly what's going to allow Ukraine to resist Russia over time," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Biden will also be discussing the problem of reforms aimed at rooting out Ukraine's deeply entrenched problem of corruption.

In September, the current U.S. ambassador to Ukraine offered blunt criticism of the country's Prosecutor-General's Office, which he said was aggressively undermining reform.

“The Office of the Prosecutor-General itself is in desperate need of reform,” the senior U.S. administration official reiterated on December 2.

#3

Kerry calls for Russia to pull back from Ukraine

By Carol Morello

Washington Post, December 3, 2015

Secretary of State John F. Kerry called on Russia Thursday to withdraw its troops and equipment from eastern Ukraine so a peace deal can take effect by the end of the year.

“This is the time for concrete steps to end this disastrous and unnecessary conflict, and begin the process of rebuilding in Ukraine’s east,” Kerry said in remarks at a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has the often-dangerous task of monitoring the situation on the ground in Ukraine.

A pall of sadness hung over the group’s annual meeting, as diplomats in turn offered condolences to other nations for citizens killed in terrorist attacks and other acts of violence.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was among several foreign ministers who gave their sympathies for the 14 Americans killed in San Bernardino on Wednesday and the 130 people who died in Paris three weeks ago. Kerry expressed sorrow for the dead and wounded in California, and the loss of 224 people aboard a Russian commercial airliner shot down over the Egyptian Sinai by a group affiliated with Islamic State.

The war against the Islamic State, also known by the acronym ISIL and Arabic name Da’esh, was an ever-present motif as the diplomats attended a series of meetings at a large convention center. Kerry said the militants who have established a caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq cannot be defeated by airstrikes alone.

“Without the ability to find some ground forces prepared to take on Da’esh this will not be won completely from the air, and we know that,” said Kerry, who told reporters he was not speaking about Western forces but Syrian and other Arab troops.

Kerry also urged support for the multinational effort to start negotiations between the government in Damascus and opposition groups, and establish some sort of political transition that would usher President Bashar al-Assad from power. That in turn, he said, would open the door for a unified front to confront Islamic State.

“If we can get a political transition in place, we empower everybody,” he said. “The scourge (of Islamic State) could be eliminated within a matter of months.”

But the ongoing conflict in nearby Ukraine was an immediate occupation for many of the diplomats in Belgrade. Both the Ukrainian government in Kiev and separatist rebels have complained that after a period of relative calm, heavy artillery is being used in violation of a cease-fire negotiated in the Belarus capital of Minsk.

Kerry specifically called for the Russian withdrawal, free access for OSCE monitors, the holding of elections, the return of Ukrainian control over its border with Russia and the release of all hostages and prisoners.

Kerry was repeating an assertion he has made many times before. What was striking was the venue and the timing. By saying it again before the OSCE and their top diplomats, he made clear that the Ukraine conflict would be high on the agenda when he met with Lavrov shortly afterward.

The West has dangled the prospect of easing economic sanctions against Russia if it helps implement the peace deal negotiated in Minsk last February by the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine. It expires on Dec. 31, and U.S. officials say there is little chance the deadline will be met.

The United States says Russia continues to provide separatists with arms and troops in what's known as the Donetsk Basin region, which in turn ensures the fighting continues sporadically. Moscow denies the charge, though both Kiev and Washington have released photographs suggesting otherwise.

The West said sanctions against Russia, in effect since it annexed Crimea in 2014 and further strengthened since then, can be eased if Russia takes steps that allow the Minsk agreement to take effect.

"If Moscow wants relief from sanctions ... it is there for the getting," Kerry said Wednesday at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

Another backdrop to the meeting is rising tensions between Russia and Turkey, which have been steadily spiraling downward since Turkey shot down a Russian military jet along the Syrian border.

Moscow has accused Ankara of complicity in oil sales by Islamic State smugglers. The anger ratcheted up another notch Thursday, when Russian President Vladimir Putin would never forget what Turkey did, and Turkey would come to regret it.

"If anyone thinks Russia's reaction will be limited to trade sanctions, they are deeply mistaken," he said.

The United States and other NATO countries are supporting Turkey, but are encouraging Moscow and Ankara to iron out their differences.

#4
Ukrainians erect monument to 'national heroes' who killed Uman's Jews in 18th century
By Sam Sokol
Jerusalem Post, November 30, 2015

Ukrainian Jews are outraged over the erection of a monument to the perpetrators of an eighteenth century massacre that killed thousands of their co-religionists.

Residents of the western city of Uman earlier this month unveiled the statue to Ivan Gonta and Maxim Zheleznyakov, who were among the leaders of a 1768 uprising against Poland, and carried out a pogrom, which, according to some estimates, killed between 20,000 and 30,000 Jews.

According to Russian-language media reports, the five-ton granite monument, topped with statues of Gonta and Zheleznyakov, was built with funds donated by local businesses, a fact that enraged Russian Jewish Congress president Yuri Kanner.

Much of the local economy in Uman rests upon the annual high-holiday pilgrimage to the grave of the hassidic master Rebbe Nachman, who requested that he be buried there to be close to the martyrs.

Calling it "a monument to thugs built by Jewish money," Kanner asserted that building such a memorial near the mass grave of the victims was "not just blasphemy [but] savagery."

This is a "glorification of those whose hands are stained with blood," he wrote in his blog.

Eduard Dolinsky of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee blamed the far-right Svoboda party for the monument. Svoboda was accused of attacking a Jewish tent city in Uman immediately prior to Rosh Hashana this year, and there is frequent tension between Jewish pilgrims and Ukrainian locals.

He added that it appears that there is no great outcry among Ukrainians regarding the issue, citing the expected presence of Ukrainian Orthodox Patriarch Filaret at a ceremony blessing the monument on Saturday.

“No comment from the government or from civil society has been made about this. Everyone is calm and this is a shame,” he told The Jerusalem Post.

Jewish groups in the country have begun putting pressure on Filaret to make reference to the Jews killed in Uman during the ceremony, said Vyacheslav Likhachev of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress.

“I think that in the common Ukrainian mass identity and mass historical self-identity, people even don’t know that there were Jewish victims of Gonta and Zheleznyakov,” he said, explaining that the pair had been placed in “a pantheon, a long historical list of persons from Bohdan Khmelnytsky to Stepan Bandera who struggled for Ukrainian independence.”

Both Khmelnytsky, who was a Ukrainian leader in the seventeenth century, and Bandera, who was a prominent nationalist leader in the twentieth, were responsible for mass killings of Jews and are considered seminal historical figures in contemporary Ukraine.

#5

Talks With Russia on EU-Ukraine Trade Deal Fail to Reach Compromise

By Laurence Norman and Laura Mills

Wall Street Journal, December 1, 2015

Russia laid out a long list of demands for amending a sweeping trade deal between Ukraine and the European Union a month before the pact is due to be fully implemented.

The new demands came at a fresh round of discussions among the three sides aimed at mitigating Russian concerns about the deal. But with no breakthrough on Tuesday after 17 months of talks, hopes are fading that a compromise can be found.

Brussels set up the three-way talks in July 2014 as a bid to ease tensions between Kiev and Moscow after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The EU hopes an agreement on steps to tackle the concerns will prevent Moscow retaliating against Ukraine when Brussels and Kiev fully implement the accord on Jan. 1.

The EU has said that the discussions don’t give Russia any veto over its bilateral pact with Ukraine. Still, European officials say that if the three sides can find practical solutions to prevent Russian firms losing out, they should do so.

Despite 18 rounds of talks, though, EU and Ukrainian officials charge that Moscow has never raised specific concerns about the pact that the two sides could realistically address. Russia continues to warn it will broaden trade penalties against Kiev if the full deal goes ahead next month.

EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström cited some progress in Tuesday’s talks, in particular that Russia for the first time accepted using an EU draft of possible solutions to its concerns as the basis for talks. “They still have some political problems” with the agreement, she said. “But I think they are starting to move to discuss the more concrete issues.”

However, she said Russia unexpectedly came to the meeting with a “very, very long” list of proposed amendments, some that were unacceptable, but some that could allow for technical solutions. It wasn’t immediately clear what was on the list.

“I think we can find common language on most of them,” she told reporters after the meeting.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin said the Russian side presented a mix of new and old demands. “Some proposals are for us clearly unacceptable,” he said.

“We agreed to continue working at the expert level and at the ministerial level, but because there is not much time left, some kind of extraordinary measures will be necessary to reach an agreement,” Russian Economics Minister Alexey Ulyukaev said in comments published by Interfax news agency.

Russia has raised a broad range of concerns about the pact. It contends that the agreement could create nontariff barriers to Ukraine-Russia trade, undercut Russian food-standard rules and sever links between critical defense and other industries in Russia and east Ukraine.

The EU and Ukraine have both said they wouldn’t amend the signed pact directly, a step that would force all EU member states and Ukraine to ratify the agreement anew. However, they have said they can use the flexibility in the agreement, for example giving Ukraine longer to adjust to higher EU regulatory standards for products, which would also give Russian firms more time to adjust.

The EU has already slashed tariffs for Ukrainian goods but in September 2014, it gave Kiev until Jan. 1 to cut its own tariffs for EU goods and fully implement its side of the deal. Ukrainian and EU officials reiterated on Tuesday that deadline will be met.

As talks have continued and the conflict has dragged on in eastern Ukraine between the Kiev government and pro-Russian rebels, bilateral trade has plummeted.

The Ukrainian government says that trade with Russia fell 58% in dollar terms in the first half of 2015 compared with a year earlier.

Russia has banned certain produce from Ukraine including vegetables and cheese made at specific factories. Moscow said last month it planned to expand the ban to all Ukrainian produce by January 2016.

Ms. Malmström said there could be fresh technical talks next week and pledged that Brussels was open to further discussions after Jan. 1 if Russia’s concerns persisted. But she warned that would happen only if Moscow refrained from new trade penalties on its neighbor.

#6

Ukraine!? What Ukraine?

By Brian Whitmore

RFE/RL, December 3, 2015

What Vladimir Putin didn't say may be just as important as what he did say.

In a one-hour speech to a joint session of the Russian parliament, Vladimir Putin did not utter the word "Ukraine" once.

He didn't attack the authorities in Kyiv. He didn't talk about the plight of Russian-speakers in Ukraine. He didn't mention the conflict in Donbas. He did mention Crimea, but only in passing.

This is significant. Along with his live call-in program and his end-of-year press conference, Putin's annual state-of-the-nation address is one of the Kremlin leader's big set pieces.

He has the nation's -- and much of the world's -- attention. It's a valuable opportunity to set an agenda, frame the debate, and lay down markers.

And he chose not to talk -- at all -- about a conflict that has consumed the country and dominated Russia's relations with the West and much of the outside world for the better part of two years.

Just for a bit of perspective, in his 2014 state-of-the-nation speech, Putin mentioned Ukraine 18 times, including four references in the first five minutes.

Moscow's attention, of course, is elsewhere at the moment.

Russia has a new war in Syria where it is trying to prop up its ally, Bashar al-Assad, while trying -- and largely failing -- to convince the world that it is fighting Islamic State militants.

And the Turkish air force's downing of a Russian SU-24 warplane on November 24 has focused much of the Kremlin's ire on Ankara.

Putin may not have mentioned Ukraine in this year's speech, but he referred to Turkey seven times, Syria eight times, and terrorism 24 times.

Moscow's attention has shifted away from Ukraine because it is losing the conflict in Donbas and losing it decisively.

Putin's Plan A in Donbas, the seizure of what his ideologists call Novorossia -- the strip of land from Kharkiv in the north to Odesa in the south -- was an abject failure.

Most of Ukraine's Russian speakers prefer being an ethnic and linguistic minority in a democracy to being a majority in a kleptocratic autocracy.

And Putin's Plan B, forcing Ukraine to integrate separatist-held territories in the east on Moscow's terms -- as a Trojan horse that can destabilize the country -- is also flailing.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who was dealt a terrible hand with the Minsk cease-fire, has played it masterfully.

But the underlying reason Ukraine has faded from the radar -- and from Putin's big speech -- is the underlying logic of policymaking in Moscow.

In a clever piece for the Atlantic Council, Andrew Kornbluth wrote that the Putin regime is not so much a rogue state as a "troll state" that aims to "needle the West and cheer Russians," while at the same time seeking to advance the interests of the Kremlin's ruling clique.

"By tormenting others, trolls create the illusion of action and assuage their own nagging feelings of powerlessness. Likewise, Putin's military adventures in Ukraine and Syria have been remarkably successful at distracting attention from the worsening decay of Russia's human and economic capital," Kornbluth wrote.

"To sustain their short attention spans, trolls must constantly find new and varied ways to bait their opponents. Hence the dizzying pivot from promoting the so-called 'People's Republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk, which were banished from the headlines almost overnight, to heralding the creation of an 'anti-terrorist coalition' in Syria."

But while a foreign policy of trolling can often wrongfoot opponents, it has its limits.

"Trolling can unintentionally escalate into life-or-death confrontation, a risk that was made real when, after months of Russian incursions into foreign airspace from the Baltics to Japan, Turkey shot down a Russian bomber passing over its territory," Kornbluth wrote.

And Russia's trolling adventure in Ukraine has alienated it from the West, led to crippling sanctions, and lost it any vestiges of goodwill in Kyiv, perhaps for generations.

It's no wonder that Putin doesn't want to talk about that.

#7

On Ukraine's front lines, U.S.-supplied equipment is falling apart

By Thomas Gibbons-Neff

Washington Post, November 30, 2015

The United States has delivered more than \$260 million in nonlethal military equipment to help the government of Ukraine in its fight against a Russian-backed insurgency, but some of the U.S.-supplied gear meant to protect and transport Ukrainian military forces is little more than junk.

On the outskirts of the separatist-controlled city of Donetsk, for example, one Ukrainian special forces unit is using U.S.-supplied Humvees dating from the late 1980s and early 1990s, based on serial numbers on the vehicles.

Three of the Humvees had plastic doors and windows — barely any protection at all. The tires on one of the trucks blew apart after driving only a few hundred kilometers, the result of sitting in a warehouse too long, said one mechanic.

Another infantry unit of approximately 120 men received from the Pentagon a single bulletproof vest — a type that U.S. troops stopped using in combat during the mid-2000s.

[Inside the Ukrainian special forces fight against separatists – and their own government]

"If the Americans are going to send us equipment, don't send us secondhand stuff," said one Ukrainian special forces commander, who like other soldiers spoke on condition of anonymity to criticize the condition of his unit's gear.

The obsolete equipment was identified on a tour near the front lines in eastern Ukraine with help from mechanics serving in the Ukrainian army and through interviews with front-line troops. In some cases, serial numbers were used to trace the origins of certain vehicles.

The decaying state of U.S.-supplied equipment on Ukraine's front lines has bred distrust and lowered morale among Ukrainian troops, soldiers said. Experts said the low quality of the gear also calls into question the U.S. government's commitment to a war that is entering its second year, with well-equipped Russian-backed separatists still firmly entrenched in Ukraine's eastern region.

In recent weeks, attacks along Ukraine's front lines have spiked, with Ukrainian troops reporting casualties almost daily. Last month, five Ukrainian soldiers were killed in one day.

"Despite what people think, this is still a war," another Ukrainian special forces soldier said.

The Humvees observed near the front of the fighting were part of a batch of about 100 sent to Ukraine earlier this year. The vehicles were shipped under a special executive power granted by Congress that allows the president to send equipment to foreign countries quickly.

A Pentagon spokesman, Army Lt. Col Joe Sowers, wouldn't comment directly on the condition of the vehicles but said in an e-mail that the United States has continued to send equipment and provide training "to help Ukraine better monitor and secure its border, operate more safely and effectively, and preserve and enforce its territorial integrity."

U.S. officials attributed the presence of rundown U.S. defense equipment on Ukraine's front lines to the need to get equipment to Ukraine quickly at the start of the war.

According to a senior Defense Department official, the United States was wholly unprepared for Russia's involvement in Ukraine and had to source funds and respond to Ukraine's requests for aid from a "cold start."

"We wanted to get things there as fast as possible, and we had no money appropriated for this crisis," said the official, who requested anonymity to discuss sensitive policy issues. "Does that mean everything was perfect? Of course not."

It is unclear how much of the material sent to Ukraine is secondhand and antiquated. The U.S. government has also sent new equipment, such as night vision gear and first-aid kits. Troops there have also received advanced equipment such as counter artillery, counter mortar radars, and communications gear.

In addition to the dated vehicles already sent, another 100 Humvees of similar vintage have been authorized to be offered for shipment to Ukraine as part of the military's standard program for transferring extra equipment "as is" to foreign countries.

The program sends "the stuff that's sitting around somewhere that no service can use," said an official at the Pentagon who spoke on condition of anonymity to speak frankly about the equipment. "In some cases, Humvees might be provided ... for spare parts. They're not good enough to drive, but you can tear them apart and cannibalize [them]."

In the case of the Humvees in Ukraine, the operations chief of the unit that received the vehicles, who gave his name only as Lt. Col. Andrei, said they were supposed to be sent in working order — not stripped for parts. The cost to purchase a Humvee tire in Ukraine is roughly \$1,000, so instead the unit bought a cheap used SUV for a little more than what it would take to replace two Humvee tires.

"Why would I pay to keep replacing tires when I could just buy a car?" asked Andrei, who allowed only his first name to be used to protect his family living in Russian-occupied territory.

The special presidential authority is just one of five Defense and State Department programs tapped to supply Ukraine in the months since the start of the conflict.

The Pentagon has also devoted resources to the war by having Army units establish various training programs to boost the fledgling Ukrainian military and its abilities to maintain itself. To some however, the battered equipment on the war's front lines is emblematic of a U.S. policy that has done the minimum to bolster the Ukrainian government and deter a reinvigorated Russia.

Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Tex.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said there is strong bipartisan support in Congress to help Ukraine. Thornberry pointed to the recently passed National Defense Authorization Act that included \$300 million in support — including lethal aid — for the embattled Eastern European country. The only issue, Thornberry added, is that “we can’t make the president deliver it.”

The administration’s “overriding concern here is to avoid aggravating Putin,” said Thornberry in a recent phone interview. “And it has a broader effect in limiting the Ukrainians’ ability to defend their country.”

When asked about the administration’s goals, a spokesman for the National Security Council declined to comment on the record. The current aid policy toward Ukraine is representative of the Obama administration’s desire to “do enough militarily to ensure the Ukrainians can defend their territory,” said Evelyn N. Farkas, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia/Ukraine/Eurasia. But she said that more could be done to deter future attacks.

“Right now, considering the stakes, our resources are out of whack,” Farkas said.

She added that a diplomatic solution to the crisis can be reached through stronger engagement — namely in the form of sending weapons to Ukraine.

The White House, though, has resisted sending lethal aid on grounds that sending weapons to Ukrainian troops would only escalate the conflict, said Farkas.

“This is about our values. This is about the right of Ukraine’s citizens to elect their government and to be fully sovereign and not under Russia’s thumb,” she said. “We have to take a stand, and we have to make sure Ukraine succeeds.”

#8

Netanyahu and Putin hail Israeli-Russian coordination Israel Hayom, December 1, 2015

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Paris on Monday on the sidelines of the global climate conference taking place in the French capital. During their meeting, both Netanyahu and Putin praised the coordination system in place to prevent accidental clashes between Israeli and Russian military planes over the skies of Syria and the surrounding areas.

"I think that ... the events of recent days prove the importance of our coordination, our de-confliction mechanisms, our attempts to cooperate with each other to prevent unnecessary accidents and tragedies, and I believe that we've been successful," Netanyahu said. "It's important."

Putin said, "The mechanism that has been promoted by you and proposed by you [that] presupposes contacts between the militaries to prevent incidents due to the dramatic developments in the region has been efficient."

Netanyahu, who last met with Putin in September in Moscow, reiterated on Monday the threat posed by militant Islam.

"I think we are engaged in a big battle against militant Islam, the terrorism it spews forward, the savagery, the barbarism," Netanyahu said. "I hope that Israel and Russia can see eye to eye on all the strategic matters, but I want to assure you that we believe that it's within our powers to have very good coordination on the ground and in the air so that we do not create the kind of problems that we've been experiencing."

"I'm very satisfied by the fact that our militaries have been very careful to coordinate with one another and will continue to do so. I think this is an indication of the openness and the success of the relationship between Israel and Russia."

Putin said many "dramatic developments" have occurred around the globe since he last met with Netanyahu, in September. Regarding Russia's ties with Israel, Putin said, "We are satisfied with the progress of bilateral relations."

The Russian president also congratulated Netanyahu ahead of the upcoming Hanukkah holiday. "It's a very good and bright holiday that symbolizes the victory, the triumph of light over dark," Putin said. "And I really hope that in international affairs we'll have it this way as well."

After his meeting with Putin, Netanyahu said, "We agreed to deepen the coordination between us to prevent accidents." The prime minister noted that Israel's freedom of action in the region was not limited by its coordination with Russia.

Also in Paris on Monday, Netanyahu shook hands with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas for the first time since September 2010. The prime minister later said the handshake stemmed from good manners.

"We did not talk about anything material," Netanyahu said. "It took place during a group photo and there was a protocol. It is important that the world see that we are always ready to talk. On the other hand, I have no illusions about Abbas. He must stop his incitement and lies about the Temple Mount."

Netanyahu also brought up Palestinian incitement during a chance encounter with U.S. President Barack Obama in a hallway in Paris on Monday.

"The president told me that he intends to talk with Abbas about this issue and that he agrees with me that this has to end," Netanyahu said.

Netanyahu met with numerous world leaders on Monday, including EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, British Prime Minister David Cameron, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, French President Francois Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Netanyahu also had chance encounters with a number of other leaders.

The prime minister told reporters he had also spoken with several unidentified Arab leaders.

"Arab leaders come up to me in front of other world leaders and express appreciation," Netanyahu said. "Something is going on."

Netanyahu also met with Britain's Prince Charles, and invited him to visit Israel.

"People are looking to get closer with Israel," Netanyahu said with satisfaction. "They know we are a regional and global power. Everyone spoke with me about technology and cyber. They also understand we can help in the war against radical Islam. This is manifested by the desire of many leaders to speak and cooperate with Israel."

#9

Russia unlikely to meet Ukraine peace deal deadline, NATO says

By Robin Emmott

Reuters, December 2, 2015

NATO's top commander warned on Wednesday there was little chance that Russia would meet a year-end deadline for a peace deal in eastern Ukraine, saying the calmer situation there did not mean the end of the conflict was near.

Spelling out what many Western officials believe, NATO Supreme Allied Commander Philip Breedlove said Russia continued to support separatists in the area and that the ebb and flow in violence was Russia's way of demonstrating its power.

"Russia still supports its proxies in eastern Ukraine," Breedlove told a news conference. "It is not very likely that we can get everything we need in Minsk by the end of the year," he said, referring to the 12-point peace deal signed in the Belarus capital in February.

Russia denies it has provided weapons to the rebels or that it has troops engaged in the conflict that has killed more than 8,000 people since it April 2014, following Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula.

Breedlove, who also heads the U.S. European Command, said Western intelligence indicated otherwise.

"Russia is completely in control of what is happening on the line of contact and they will use that in the future," he said.

"We have seen multiple convoys into the Donbass, they have all been labeled as humanitarian support. We all know that is not correct," he added. The Donbass is the commonly used name for industrial regions of eastern Ukraine now under rebel control.

After a period of relative calm, both rebels and the Ukrainians have complained of more violations of the ceasefire negotiated as part of the Minsk deal. Both say heavy artillery that was meant to have been withdrawn is still being used.

The leaders of France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia negotiated the Minsk peace deal in February and the West has tied its implementation to any loosening of economic sanctions on Russia. The deal expires on Dec. 31 but France's President Francois Hollande has signaled it could be prolonged, while sanctions on Russia are also likely to be continued.

Speaking on Wednesday at NATO headquarters, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to act: "If Moscow wants relief from sanctions ... it is there for the getting."

"Implement Minsk and this can be achieved," he told a separate news conference following a meeting of NATO foreign ministers who discussed the Ukraine crisis.

Breedlove and Kerry said end-of-year targets set under the Minsk agreement included restoration of Ukrainian control on its eastern border, removal of all non-Ukrainian state forces from the region and release of hostages.

#10

Official: Russian Arms Violations Prompt U.S. Weapons Upgrades

By Mike Eckel

RFE/RL, December 2, 2015

A top U.S. arms control official says Washington is investing in and deploying new and updated weapons systems in response to Russia's alleged violation of a key Cold War-era missile treaty and other activity.

The comments by Brian McKeon, principal deputy under secretary of defense for policy, came during a congressional hearing focusing primarily on U.S. allegations that Russia has violated the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, known as the INF.

Russia has denied the accusation, and in turn says that Washington itself is in violation because of aspects of its European antimissile shield -- a claim the United States rejects.

McKeon told the House of Representatives' Armed Service Committee on December 1 that the new investments were "prudent planning" and said they included new unmanned drone systems, new long-range cruise missiles, long-range bombers, and an updated nuclear gravity bomb called the B61-21.

"Russia is not violating the INF treaty in isolation from its overall aggressive behavior," he said.

"Stated another way, this is not just an arms control issue, but represents a broader challenge to transatlantic security," McKeon said. "Accordingly, we are developing a comprehensive response to Russian military actions and are committing investments now that we will make irrespective of Russia's returning to compliance with the INF treaty."

The 1987 agreement, signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, eliminated an entire class of missiles: nearly 2,700 intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles, the majority of them Russian. It was the first treaty to outlaw an entire category of already-deployed weaponry and the first to allow for intrusive on-site inspections.

The deal did not concern sea- or air-launched intermediate-range missiles.

The U.S. State Department formally accused Moscow of violating the treaty in its annual compliance report in 2014, and repeated that in this year's report.

Rose Gottemoeller, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, told the committee that the Russians had begun testing the system in 2008, but it wasn't until 2011 that there was enough data to conclude it violated the treaty.

She said that U.S. officials continue to be puzzled why Russia would develop the missile system, given that Moscow's arsenal includes other cruise and ballistic missiles of various ranges, fired from ships, aircraft, or trucks.

"We have made very clear this is not a technicality, a one-off event, or a case of mistaken identity," she said. "This is a serious Russian violation of one of the most basic obligations under the INF treaty."

In lodging its own accusations against Washington, Moscow has pointed to U.S. weapons and missile defense systems that are being deployed to Europe, such as advanced Aegis missile radar technology.

Russia's military deployment to Syria — its largest outside the former Soviet Union since the 1980s — has grabbed the attention of defense experts, watching for new weapons systems and tactics. The launch of cruise

missiles on Syria targets from Russian naval ships in early October prompted more speculation about the nature of the INF-violating weapon.

Some arms control experts have looked closely at another weapon system, long in use by Russian forces, called Iskander, and a missile known as the 9M729. Experts said if that particular missile is indeed the one in violation of the INF, it would be indistinguishable from other short-range missiles, and INF treaty rules might then require the elimination of the entire launch system -- something the Russians would never agree to.

On October 31, NATO's top military commander, General Philip Breedlove, announced that Russia had conducted another test of the banned missile system in early September.

And, in an interview with RFE/RL in the same month, Gottemoeller was emphatic that U.S. intelligence has not misidentified the Russian weapon system.

"We are talking about a missile that has been flight-tested as a ground-launched cruise-missile system to these ranges that are banned under this treaty," she said.

#11

Armenia: Church, State Joining Forces Against Western Religious Groups?

By Marianna Grigoryan

Eurasianet, November 24, 2015

As Armenia readies for a controversial December 6 referendum, public attention has tended to focus on proposed constitutional amendments that would alter the country's political system. But another, less discussed amendment is generating concern among some who question whether the country's religious minorities, often deemed purveyors of "perverse" Western values, could suffer.

Wariness of so-called "sects" — a euphemism for primarily evangelical Christian denominations, including Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses — has long existed in Armenia. The state-financed Armenian Apostolic Church, believed to be the world's oldest Christian institution, is widely seen as a major pillar of national identity.

Currently, the constitution provides for church-state separation. Constitutional amendments proposed by a commission working under President Serzh Sargsyan's office would provide for freedom of religion and ban religious discrimination, yet article 41 stipulates that such freedom could be restricted "with the aim of protecting state security, the public order, health and morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

Statements by senior Apostolic Church clergy and members of the ruling Republican Party of Armenia about the need to defend "national security" and "spiritual security" against Armenia's 65 officially registered religious minorities suggest that this provision could be broadly interpreted, said Stepan Danielian, chair of the non-profit Cooperation for Democracy Center.

"We assume that this provision is going to be used for restricting the rights of religious organizations," said Danielian, a political scientist who has conducted extensive research on the relationship between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the government.

The constitutional commission has not responded to such criticism.

The proposed changes assert that "religious organizations shall be separate from the state," but they would also give the Armenian Apostolic Church a privileged place in society. The wording notes that the Apostolic

Church has an “exclusive mission” as “the national church in the spiritual life of the Armenian people, in the development of its national culture, and in the preservation of its national identity.”

The current constitution defines that role as an “exclusive historical mission.” An earlier change to “a unique mission,” made in response to criticism from constitutional law experts at the Council of Europe, the continent’s main human-rights body, has been removed for unclear reasons.

The Church has not commented on the amendments’ wording, but is a staunch supporter of constitutional reform. So far, religious minorities have not expressed concern about potential changes. In 2015, the US Department of State, which has highlighted religious discrimination in Armenia, reported that “most” believe their situation has improved recently.

Yet Archimandrite Komitas Hovnanian, a prominent cleric in the capital, Yerevan, and surrounding region, insists that Armenians need to exercise caution about alternative religious groups. Hovnanian and other members of the clergy do not conceal a disdain for Western values.

Repeating a popular meme among Orthodox believers in Eurasia, Hovnanian alleged that Western values encourage social maladies, including suicide, incest, pedophilia and homosexuality. Foreign sects help spread such ideas in Armenia, he added.

“We go into any Western recycling bin and declare that we share these ‘values,’” he scoffed. “If anything is brought to Armenia, it doesn’t mean we must worship it.” Foreign “religious movements ... don’t work for the benefit of our country, but, rather, aim to divide it.”

None of the groups in question advocate such behavior. Yet similar denunciations also have occurred in Armenia’s northern neighbor, Georgia, a predominantly Christian Orthodox country, and in its closest strategic ally, Russia, also majority Orthodox. The Armenian Apostolic Church is part of Oriental Orthodoxy, a separate branch of Christian Orthodoxy.

In a 2015 poll by the Stockholm-based World Values Survey, a network of international social scientists, 56.6 percent of the 1,100 Armenians surveyed reportedly expressed intolerance toward religious minorities.

Leading members of the governing Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) have also demonstrated flashes of intolerance. On October 7, senior RPA members in parliament called for public television and radio to be used for “fighting against sects.”

“It is no secret that, under the shadow of democracy, quite a lot of money enters the country and that money is used to create obstacles for our national values, our traditions, our strong families, our church and, here, Armenian Public TV has a big role to play,” argued RPA faction head Vahram Baghdasarian, news outlets reported.

Mainstream pro-government TV programs in Armenia already propagate those concerns about “sects,” but, with public television, a broader audience could be gained.

Deputy Parliamentary Speaker Eduard Sharmazanov declared that, after “the 70-year-long darkness” of the Soviet era, “citizens of an independent Armenia” need to promote the values of the Armenian Apostolic Church and respect for Armenia’s alphabet.

The Public TV and Radio Council has expressed willingness to create “such a show.”

Human rights activist Avetik Ishkhanian, chair of the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, worries that such television programming could “imply mutual agreement between the government and the church.”

“They preach obedience to the government, and the government allows the church to earn money, as much as they want, without getting taxed,” Ishkhanian said.

For a government that has had to stare down an increasing amount of criticism over corruption and protests — most recently, this summer’s Electric Yerevan movement — Church backing for the incumbent administration is not insignificant.

Out of 1,832 Armenians surveyed in a regional 2013 poll, 56 percent — the highest percentage in the South Caucasus — stated that religion is “very important” in their daily life. Another 38 percent deemed it “rather important.”

As a reflection of that trend, senior officials, including President Serzh Sargsyan, regularly attend the opening of new Armenian Apostolic churches. Courses on church history now have become obligatory in public schools, while some members of non-denominational Christian groups claim that army chaplains force recruits to attend Armenian Apostolic Church services. The Defense Ministry’s website features a video message about the Armenian army from Archimandrite Hovnanian, who leads a Church youth organization.