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Why are Ukraine's armed forces so ineffective?

Чому українські збройні сили так неефективні?

Зараз у Києві поновилися гострі дебати про те, що може зробити Україна для зміцнення своїх ослаблених збройних сил, особливо коли її сильний сусід знаходиться в такому агресивному настрої. Швидкого вирішення проблеми, схоже, немає. Але розповідь про деградацію української армії за останні роки демонструє корупцію масового масштабу у владі, політичну невмілість і поляризацію еліти країни, яка розкололася на проросійський і проєвропейський табори, зануривши країну в кризу.

http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0529/Why-are-Ukraine-s-armed-forces-so-ineffective

Kiev, Ukraine

In October 2012, Yuri Syrotyuk, a Ukrainian parliament member, stood up in a security and defense committee meeting to announce that if Ukraine didn't reverse the trend of deterioration in its military and change its defense strategy, "we're going to see Russian troops on our soil within a year."

Syrotyuk's colleagues from the opposition Svoboda party, nodded along in agreement but were helpless to respond. Then President Viktor Yanukovych was still in charge, and his ruling Party of Regions paid little mind to minority dissent. Mr. Yanukovych thought a weaker military was just fine for Ukraine, shifting spending towards interior ministry forces which he had more direct control over, and arguing that Russia was a close friend who could provide security if the need arose.

"As it turns out, I was right," Mr. Syrotyuk says now. Moscow seized control of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula in March and annexed the territory. Russia has also poised troops on the border with Eastern Ukraine and today, 14 Ukrainian soldiers – one a general – were killed when their helicopter was shot down by pro-Russian separatists in

Slovyansk. The rebels used a heat-seeking missile that Kiev alleges was provided by Moscow.

What Ukraine can do to reverse its weak military posture, particularly with its powerful neighbor in a belligerent mood, is now once again a topic of hot debate in Kiev. A quick fix seems unlikely. But the tale of how Ukraine's forces degraded in recent years illustrates the mass-scale of official corruption, political bumbling, and polarization of the country's elite into pro-Russian and pro-European camps that has plunged the country into crisis.

"During the time of independence, Ukraine's army did not grow. In fact it did just the opposite," says Dmitry Tymchuk, head of the Center for Military-Political Studies in Kiev. "So now what we have is an army with very few resources."

After the cold war

The most damaging failure has been the military not adequately developing a strategy to fight against an invasion from a neighboring country – namely Russia, says Mr. Tymchuk.

Ukraine's defense spending has decreased every year since the breakup of the Soviet Union 23 years ago. For example, in 2002, Ukraine spent about 6.8 percent of the annual state budget on the military. In 2011, Ukraine budgeted just 4 percent for the military and in 2013, just 3.6 percent.

As the budget shrank, so too did the military, though part of the reduction in force was thanks to the end of the Cold War. Still, in 1992, Ukraine's armed forces numbered around 780,000. By 1999, they had shrunk to half that and by 2009, the armed forces were down to 245,000. Today, they are at 140,000.

For years, Ukrainian leaders took comfort in the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, a treaty that saw Ukraine give up its Soviet-era nuclear weapons in exchange for guarantees of its territorial sovereignty from the United States, Britain, and Russia.

"We signed [over] all of our nuclear weapons and they each promised to protect us," says Leonid Kravchuk, the first president of Ukraine, who signed the deal.

Yanukovych's shift

In 2010, "the Ukrainian military made a sharp U-turn toward pro-Moscow ideology," says Syrotyuk, the parliament deputy. With confidence in Russia as a protector and ally, then newly-elected President Yanukovych saw little need to invest in Ukraine's military.

Instead, he began steadily steering funds to the police and other elements dedicated to internal security. The spending shift ensured those services' loyalty to Yanukovych and his oligarch allies, allowing them to safeguard their private financial empires, Syrotyuk says.

"Everyone knew that the police weren't working to protect the people," Syrotyuk says. "Meanwhile, the country's army was dwindling down to nothing."

From 2010 to 2013, the Yanukovych government also transferred 25 military bases to local governments, who then leased them to private companies, according to Nadiya Andrikevych, Mr. Syrotyuk's assistant. In November 2013, the government made plans to transfer another 96 buildings and pieces of military land, but Yanukovych was ousted before the transfers could be completed.

Ukraine's military budget was about $1.6 billion last year. While Ukrainian troops have participated in peacekeeping efforts with the United Nations, only about 6,000 of the country's 140,000 troops are ready for combat, Tymchuk says. If he's right, that's a military that will struggle to contain its pro-Russian rebels, let alone stand up to further direct Russian adventures on their territory.

“So what now?" asks Mr. Kravchuk. "Russia became the aggressor, and those countries who signed in Budapest remain silent.”

A military on the dole

When the interim government in Kiev took power after months of street protests ousted Yanukovych, it inherited a Ministry of Defense with demoralized troops whom the ministry could barely afford to keep in uniform.

In a press conference earlier this month, Arkadiy Stuzhuk, the supplies chief in the defense ministry, said Ukrainian troops had only about 40 percent of what they would need to fight in a war, including such basic supplies as helmets and body armor.

To raise money, the Ministry of Defense launched a public funding campaign, in which Ukrainians dial 565 on their mobile phone and pledge as little as 5 hryvnia, or 42 cents. As of May 28, the ministry had collected 124 million hryvnia ($10.6 million) from the public.

Western nations also stepped in, including the United States, which has given about $3.5 million to the ministry in nonlethal aid.

Some Ukrainian oligarchs have also come forward. Ihor Kolomoisky, now the Kiev-appointed governor of Dnepropetrovsk, pledged money to buy fuel for Ukrainian tanks and military vehicles. Mr. Kolomoisky is also financing at least three battalions of paramilitary troops fighting against the separatist rebels.

The battalions technically fall under Ukraine’s recently created National Guard. Some worry that the Guard's volunteer paramilitaries might ignore orders and wage their own independent campaign against separatists as fighting in the east increases and causality numbers on both sides mount.

“There are some reasons to worry,” Syrotyuk says. "But right now, Ukraine needs these volunteer groups to support the military, which has basically nothing."