



Facing crisis with Russia, Ukraine scrambles to get military up to speed

By Maxim Lott

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As tensions with Russia continue to flare, Ukraine's army is adding markings to planes and helicopters in order to distinguish them from nearly identical Russian equipment and avoid friendly fire incidents should the situation escalate further.

The addition of painted white stripes, first reported in the military blog [War is Boring](#), comes as Ukraine tries to get its military – which consists mostly of Soviet-era equipment – up to speed in the wake of the revolution in February and the subsequent invasion of parts of Ukraine by Russian forces. But the cosmetic change may be the least of Ukraine's issues concerning its outdated military gear. The Ukrainian military went through years of neglect under the now-toppled pro-Russian government, which "deliberately dismantled" the military according to the current president, Arseniy Yatsenyuk. And experts agree.

“Because its leaders have tended to be pro-Russian, Ukraine's military is as much designed not to fight Russia as it is to fight it,” Ben Friedman, who studies defense policy at the CATO Institute, told FoxNews.com.

In previous years, Ukraine's military released reports about how it received only a portion of the funding allocated to it through legislation.

“Expenditure... failed to fully meet the resource requirements of the Armed Forces,” a White Book released by the Ukraine military in 2012 noted.

It went on to say that the number of troops had recently been cut by a third, training and equipment was insufficient, and that the troops used outdated non-digital communications equipment.

In an attempt to improve its military, Ukraine has asked for international help for military supplies.

"What we need is support from the international community. We need technology and military support to overhaul the Ukrainian military and modernize -- to be ready not just to fight, but to be ready to win," Yatsenyuk said last month.

In the meantime, Ukraine has started a [fundraising drive](#) for its military, which so far has raised 111 million Ukrainian dollars, equivalent to about \$10 million US dollars.

Others have given supplies directly.

"Our office has been running a pool to donate supplies to the military... everything from armor vests to food," Justin Bruch, an American who moved from Iowa to western Ukraine in 2008 to run a large farm, said. Bruch, who still lives and works in Ukraine, said that he gives supplies rather than money due to fear of corruption.

Bruch saw the state of Ukraine's army firsthand in 2010 when tanks came through his farm on a military exercise – and broke down.

"The drivers were out working on an old piece of junk in the middle of my farm fields," he said, adding that from what he understood, the issue was an overheated engine.

On a positive note, patriotism and motivation are high in western Ukraine, he said.

"People are very pro-Ukraine and anti-Russian. The west half of Ukraine is patriotic, similar to how most Americans are about America... Another interesting thing is how many Ukrainians want to get a gun license to buy guns for self-protection. They are jealous now to think that Americans can own guns and carry for self-protection. Most don't have the feeling that the military can protect them from Russia if and when they come," he said.

The Ukrainian military also reports a bit of modernization of existing equipment, such as replacing old engines and communications equipment in some of its Soviet-era helicopters.

Why was Ukraine using such decrepit equipment, and spending just 1 percent of its gross domestic product on its military? Some experts said it was because of over-reliance on Western countries.

"More Western-oriented Ukrainians may simply have concluded that balancing Russian military strength was impossible, so why waste much money trying?" Friedman suggested. "[They] probably saw joining NATO as the best bet... Ukraine can be seen as an example of a danger created by alliances; their prospect can inhibit self-help."