

FEDERALTIMES

Ukraine Arms Transfers Still Tracked After US State Dept. Kills Report

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October 3, 2022

In 1994, the U.S. Congress enacted a statute requiring the State Department to publish a report on global military spending and arms transfers. Known as the World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers report, it provided an overview of otherwise accessible data on global military postures and spending.

But following passage of the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act, the State Department officially announced that this year's report would be the final one.

Some American political commentators worry that this change will further reduce government transparency about the Russian war in Ukraine and billions of dollars in high-tech military equipment.

This concern is misguided.

Ending the report is a problem in that it signals a continued lack of disclosure in general on U.S. arms sales policies, not because it decreases transparency over U.S. support to Ukraine.

For one, the State Department report is not a source of otherwise inaccessible data. The department collects all its data from public sources they compile into one document. This is convenient, but it is not the only source for this information.

First, a variety of other organizations release annual reports using similar methodology.

The Center for International Policy has three datasets that cover U.S. security aid, arms sales, and military training. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has five databases covering extensive issues, including global arms transfers, the Arms Trade Treaty, the global arms industry, multilateral peace operations, and global military expenditures.

And the Cato Institute publishes the Arms Sales Risk Index, which covers the risks associated with each arms sale made by the United States since 2001.

Thus, even without the WMEAT report, information about weapons transfers to Ukraine is still readily available.

Further, the report presents data from three years prior to its release. For example, in this year's report, the data went until 2019. Arms transfers to Ukraine during the war would likely not show up in the report until 2025, far too late to do anything to stop any current transfers.

Finally, the State Department keeps a public tally of what it is sending to Ukraine, resulting in a fairly unprecedented amount of transparency. It does so at the level of individual weapons systems and the total costs associated with said transfers.

Ultimately, the State Department's website has more information on Ukraine than any future report would.

But while fears about what the end of the report means for Ukraine are unfounded, it is important to concede that there are legitimate problems with ending it. There is a critical lack of transparency in U.S. arms transfers. It is difficult to access data from the State, Defense, and Commerce Departments. Thus, losing a source providing this information every year is a blow because transparency leads to a greater public knowledge of the costs associated with arms sales.

Still, it is important to see the larger picture. If anything, recent news suggests there has been an increasing amount of transparency at the State Department.

For instance, the department recently changed how it accounts for human rights abuses from groups receiving U.S. security assistance. The laws that govern this – the Leahy Laws - govern the delivery of security assistance by attempting to ensure that recipients have not committed gross violations of human rights.

Prior to September 30, these laws made it unclear how civil society groups in recipient countries could report these human rights abuses to the U.S. government. Now, however, the State Department has created an easily accessible portal that civil society groups can use to provide information to the United States about human rights abuses.

This vastly increases the State Department's access to information before sending weapons to potential human rights abusers, which is a massive step forward, despite the department's simultaneous ending of the WMEAT report. This change in Leahy vetting is arguably the largest increase to human rights reporting from weapons transfers in the last thirty years.

There is no need to worry that the end of the WMEAT report will lead to more secret sales to Ukraine or elsewhere. But another source providing more transparency over arms sales and military expenditures is gone. Nonetheless, while transparency takes a small hit, protection of human rights in weapons transfers exponentially increases.

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