

Kyiv Post

Ex-Putin adviser warns of coming Russian attack on strategic water canal

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — A former senior adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin has told the Kyiv Post that he believes Moscow is preparing to send its special forces to seize a vital canal that provided water to Crimea before Ukraine shut off supplies following the Kremlin's invasion and illegal annexation of the peninsula in 2014.

Andrey Illarionov worked closely with Putin as chief adviser on economics to the presidential administration in 2000-2005. He had hoped to help democracy take root in Russia but became disillusioned as Putin ushered in an increasingly autocratic and repressive rule.

He quit his senior government roles in 2005 and sided with anti-Putin opposition groups. Illarionov left Russia and settled in the United States, where he works at the Washington-based libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute, and is known for his strident criticism of his former boss.

On Dec. 5, Illarionov passed on a warning to Ukrainian diplomats in the U.S. capital that he believes Russian military are preparing to break out of the peninsula deep into Ukraine's mainland in order to capture the canal and other vital facilities.

The peninsula has few natural water sources of its own and relied on a 400-kilometer canal channeling water from Ukraine's largest river, the Dnipro, to provide up to 85 percent of its water needs.

After Moscow invaded and annexed Crimea, the Ukrainian government blocked the canal and stopped water supplies to Crimea in summer 2014. Since then, the threat of a heavy drought has been among the top topics in Crimea.

"Without water from Ukraine, Crimea is doomed," Illarionov said.

He explained the peninsula's own meager supplies were barely enough for drinking water – let alone for its agricultural and industrial needs and that reservoirs, which had been fed by water from Ukraine, would likely dry up entirely by next summer.

"Putin needs to do something before then," he said, "because otherwise it's impossible to defend that territory without water. He has a window of opportunity between the end of the G20 summit just held in Argentina and March 31, the presidential election in Ukraine."

Illarionov believes that, before the election, it would be hard for President Petro Poroshenko to mobilize the people and army for the defense of Ukraine.

The former Putin adviser told the Kyiv Post that he based his grim conclusions on information from his own Russian contacts and a number of other factors that he said should sound alarm bells.

Illarionov said that Russian publications in recent days had published articles about water shortages on the peninsula and about military exercises in the north of Crimea near the narrow land corridor linking it to Ukraine's mainland Kherson region.

He believes the weak reaction to Moscow's aggression last month in the Azov Sea when its naval ships rammed and fired upon three small Ukrainian vessels has emboldened the Russian leader.

"Putin (thinks he) has nothing to lose. We've seen since the Azov Sea incident that the West has not imposed any serious penalties."

The canal was hailed as a great communist feat of engineering when it was built in the 1960s and 1970s. It became increasingly important as the peninsula's population grew. Crimea had 2 million people before Russia's takeover. Many Ukrainians fled.

When Kyiv cut off the canal Moscow considered ways of replacing water supplies by drilling wells, building pipelines stretching hundreds of kilometers from rivers on the Russian mainland and even shipping in water. All those options are unattractive because they are expensive or would take a long time to construct.