

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 7
Issue 2 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 27

August 2003

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Kevin Dansereau

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Recommended Citation

Dansereau, Kevin (2003) "NATO-Sponsored Project Reduces Massive Mine Stockpile Across Eastern Ukraine," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 27.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol7/iss2/27>

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Issue 7.2, August 2003

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NATO-Sponsored Project Reduces Massive Mine Stockpile Across Eastern Ukraine

The Ukraine recently destroyed 400,000 landmines in its effort to reduce the millions of landmines stockpiled within its boundaries. The following article discusses the destruction project, which began in 2002 and was sponsored by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as part of the Partnership for Peace Program (PfP) and involved Ukrainians destroying and recycling mines into children's toys.

by Kevin Dansereau, *MAIC*

From Weapon Producing to Mine Destroying in Donetsk

Several million AP mines remain in the Ukraine, most of which were produced for the Soviet army throughout the 20th century. The mines continue to threaten the lives of innocent Ukrainians; however, one particular chemical factory in Donetsk recently destroyed 400,000 of those mines in efforts to continue the process of eliminating the Ukraine's massive stockpile.

The Donetsk Chemical Plant in the Ukraine was once the location for the production of weapons that helped support the Soviet army. In January of 2002, however, the same plant in Donetsk was converted into a place for destroying the massive stockpile of AP mines and even recycling some of the mines into toys for children. The conversion was sponsored by NATO's PfP Program, which seeks to safely detonate mines and recycle the material for civilian purposes. As NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson stated, "this project is a very concrete example of our practical cooperation on defense reform and our joint efforts to eliminate the legacy of the Cold War."¹ In the case of Donetsk Chemical Plant, the plastic from the dismantled mines has been converted into toys for children. NATO transformed the chemical plant by providing all of the necessary equipment for the destruction of the mines. The new sophisticated equipment, along with the Ukraine's expertise in destroying mines, made it possible to destroy a large portion of landmines collected from various sites within the Ukraine. NATO set the goal of destroying 400,000 AP mines in approximately one year for the Donetsk employees, with the help of NATO's Maintenance and Supply Agency (NAMSA).

Ironically, the same employees that formerly worked to produce weapons had the task of dismantling the dangerous mines. With a struggling economy, employees at the chemical plant expressed their pleasure at having the opportunity to work again in addition to saving lives by destroying mines. One Donetsk plant employee stated, "Each mine I pick up is one less mine that might kill or disable someone. It feels good to be doing something useful and positive."² Despite the difficulties of destroying the mines, the workers in Donetsk completed their goal of destroying 400,000 AP mines at the end of May. A closing ceremony in Donetsk was held to celebrate the conclusion of the project, which began only a year and a half earlier.

The Destruction Process: From Mines to Toys

As previously mentioned, the chemical plant employees were able to recycle material from the mines into toys for children. During a recent ceremony in Donetsk honoring the destruction of the mines, toys created from the recycled mines were displayed to show the transformation of the AP mines from deadly weapons into children's toys. The Spivdruzhinst STC designed the process for dismantling the mines. The process allowed workers at Donestk Chemical Plant to demolish the mines safely, using a combination of techniques. After the explosives from the mines were removed, the plastic, taken from the mine casings, was recycled into children's toys such as plastic pelicans.

Implications of the Ukraine Project

The Ukraine's effort to destroy landmines has been beneficial for other countries as well. For example, destruction of the mines has prevented terrorists from acquiring weapons from the Ukraine via the black market. The huge stockpile of weapons in the Ukraine makes it difficult to monitor weapons, which can potentially fall into the hands of terrorist organizations. Projects like the one undertaken in Donetsk reduce the likelihood of terrorists acquiring explosives from the Ukraine. As for other mine action operations in the Ukraine, the Director of the Ukrainian Mine Action Information Center, Lieutenant Colonel Sergei Pashinsky, reports that, "Mine action-related projects in [the] Ukraine are still under the process of developmen,t and during the past two years, we have been focusing on mine awareness methodologies, training and updating technology."³

In addition to the mine-to-toys project in the Ukraine, NATO's PFP Program has also initiated efforts in Albania, Moldova and Georgia to help safely destroy their stockpiles of AP mines.⁴ Ideally, the task of destroying Russia's stockpile of mines will also be a reality in the near future, but the cost of such a project will be high. The timetables to complete the landmine destruction process are also problematic because of the economic burden that landmine destruction requires.

Conclusion

The destruction of 400,000 mines in the Ukraine is a significant step in the demilitarization process across Eastern Europe. However, over six million APL's remain in the Ukraine alone. Therefore, the initial project in Donetsk is just a small step in destroying the stockpile of landmines in the Ukraine and throughout eastern Europe. With continued funding for NATO's PFP Program provided to other nations, more landmines can be destroyed. The project in the Ukraine perhaps best symbolized the transition from hostility to peace—changing destructive mines into playful toys for future generations.

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Contact Information

Kevin Dansereau
MAIC
E-mail: danserki@jmu.edu