

Was Fire at Russia's Military Research Institute Instigated by Ukraine?

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Gloating over "poetic justice" dispensed to Russia, the official Twitter account of Ukraine's defense ministry [tweeted Thursday](#): "Corruption and irresponsibility in Russia has dealt another insidious blow to its war efforts. In Tver, a research institute that develops Russia's Iskander missiles and systems for SU-27 and TU-160 bombers, which have been destroying peaceful Ukrainian cities, has burned down."

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— Defence of Ukraine (@DefenceU) [April 21, 2022](#)

The blaze that engulfed an administrative building of Russia's top-secret aerospace defense forces' central research institute, which operates under the Russian defense ministry and [develops](#) Russia's nuclear-capable ballistic missiles, quickly engulfed the building's upper three floors, forcing those inside to jump from windows and causing the roof to cave in. The research institute is located in Tver, a city about 160km (100 miles) northwest of Moscow.

The blaze that started in one of the rooms on the second floor of the administrative building spanned across some thousand square meters. Photographs of the main building showed it was completely gutted by fire. Seven people were killed in the fire while 25 were injured and at least 10 people were missing, therefore the number of casualties could increase further.

The incident was followed hours later by [unconfirmed reports](#) of a fire at one of Russia's largest chemical plants. Images on social media purported to show a large fire at the Dmitrievsky chemical plant in Kinshema about 400km (250 miles) northeast of Moscow.

Although Ukraine's defense ministry promptly pinned the blame for these acts of sabotage deep inside Russia on alleged "corruption and irresponsibility in Russia," resorting to "plausible deniability" would convince nobody, least of all Russia.

For humanitarian reasons, Russia has delivered substantial amount of aid to the people in the recently liberated areas in east Ukraine and accepted over half a million refugees displaced by the conflict, mainly from Russian-majority Donbas region. Reportedly, scores of covert operatives of the SBU, Ukraine's notorious intelligence agency, have infiltrated into Russia disguised as refugees.

These saboteurs have been [trained and equipped](#) by the CIA. Among other state-of-the-art espionage equipment, these undercover agents have been trained to operate a recently unveiled version of portable Switchblade drone that has specifically been designed for sabotage operations in Ukraine and Russia by the US Air Force.

The Phoenix Ghost, a lethal drone produced by California-based Aevex Aerospace, that the Pentagon is reluctant to detail, except to say it will take on many of the qualities of the kamikaze Switchblade drones already in the theater, has specifically been tailored for targeting Russia's military and industrial infrastructure.

"It provides the same sort of tactical capability that a Switchblade does," a defense official [told media](#). "As you know, Switchblade is a one-way drone, if you will, and it clearly is designed to deliver a punch. It's a tactical UAS [unmanned aerial system], and the Phoenix Ghost is of that same category."

The small Switchblade 300 weighs about 6 pounds and can fit in a backpack. It's tube-launched, and when fired, can hit targets up to 10 kilometers away, according to Aerovironment's website. It can loiter for up to 15 minutes and be called off target if necessary, though most of the 700 Switchblade drones provided to Ukraine's security forces by the Pentagon were Switchblade 600 variant having anti-armor capabilities.

In addition to 700 Switchblade drones previously provided to Ukraine's security forces by the Pentagon, the 121 Phoenix Ghost drones are part of the latest \$800-million security assistance package to Ukraine, announced Thursday by President Joe Biden. The package also includes 72 155mm howitzers and 144,000 artillery rounds; 72 Tactical Vehicles to tow 155mm howitzers and field equipment and spare parts.

Clearly, Ukraine's intelligence operatives disguised as refugees and equipped with portable drones, among other advanced espionage equipment, have infiltrated Russian cities. All they needed to do was to find a secure location in any city, and the remotely operated drones with a range of 10 km could easily target any military or industrial site the covert operatives were tasked to sabotage.

Besides the portable kamikaze drones, Ukraine officials were also in talks with General Atomics to procure one of the most lethal drones to have ever been developed by the defense production industry, the MQ-9 Reaper armed drones, [Forbes reported](#), citing a manufacturer spokesperson.

"We have aircraft available now for immediate transfer," General Atomics spokesman C. Mark Brinkley told Forbes correspondent last week. "With support from the U.S. government, those aircraft could be in the hands of Ukrainian military pilots in a matter

of days.”

Although Ukraine’s security forces already have the Turkish-made TB-2 Bayraktar, the MQ-9A payload capacity of 1,700 kilograms (3,800 pounds) allows it to carry more deadly and longer-range munitions than the TB-2 at 150 kilograms (330 pounds).

More importantly, the American aircraft’s superior range of 1,200 miles (1,900 kilometers) to the 150 kilometers of the TB-2 affords takeoff from safer positions and strikes deeper into enemy territory.

In addition, the aircraft’s superior ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) capacity would allow the Ukrainian military much more accurate monitoring of enemy troop movements.

According to the outlet, the drone’s estimated cost of \$32 million apiece, plus ground stations, spare parts and training valued at \$600 million, wouldn’t be a “significant hurdle,” as the tab would be picked up by the US.

Besides the prohibitive cost, another reason the US has thus far hesitated from providing larger armed drones to Ukraine is that so far, the MQ-1 Predator and the MQ-9 Reaper have only been tested in areas – Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria – where the adversary lacked serious air defense capabilities.

Whereas Russia’s globally acclaimed military equipment – including S-300 and -400 air defense systems, Kinzhal hypersonic and Kalibr cruise missiles and Sukhoi aircraft – would decimate slow-flying Predators and Reapers as easily as the Russian Air Force eliminated the Ukrainian MiG fleet in the early days of the military campaign.

In addition to mounting subversive acts deep inside Russia’s territory using Ukrainian intelligence operatives, the Pentagon [announced](#) Tuesday Ukraine’s military had received additional aircraft in a deal facilitated by Washington as well as parts for repairs to get damaged aircraft flying again. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby did not offer details on which countries provided aircraft, but acknowledged new transfers.

“They have received additional aircraft and aircraft parts to help them get more aircraft in the air,” Kirby told a news briefing. “We certainly have helped with the trans-shipment of some additional spare parts that have helped with their aircraft needs, but we have not transported whole aircraft,” he added.

Apparently, the Pentagon did not take Ukraine’s military authorities into confidence before making the announcement, because the official Twitter account of Ukraine’s air force [tweeted](#) Wednesday:

“Officially, Ukraine did not receive new aircraft from partners! With the assistance of the US Government, @KpsZSU received spare parts and components for the restoration and repair of the fleet of aircraft in the Armed Forces, which will allow to put into service more equipment.”

After being severely castigated and reprimanded by his bosses at the Pentagon for spilling the secret, Kirby backtracked on his previous statement and [sheepishly apologized](#) hours after the denial of the aircraft transfer by Ukraine’s air force on Wednesday.

“I was mistaken,” Kirby said, adding that, although he did not say that “Ukraine had received ‘whole aircraft’,” that was “the impression that I gave you.” The spokesman explained that he himself got a misguided impression about another nation following through with its offer to provide Ukraine with “whole fixed-wing aircraft.” “It has not. So, I was in error in saying that, in past tense, they had been given whole aircraft. I regret the error,” Kirby added.

Considering that Kirby is a Biden administration official and “Sleepy Joe” himself has a reputation of making frequent gaffes, the Pentagon spokesman could be forgiven for “the slip of the tongue.” But his previous statement, affirming the aircraft transfer to Ukraine, was clear and unambiguous.

Kirby told a news briefing Tuesday Ukraine had “received additional aircraft and aircraft parts.” After a reporter inquired whether the US had transferred the whole aircraft to Ukraine, implying the delivery of some of the [16 Mi-17 helicopters](#) pledged by the Biden administration in the \$800 million military assistance package to Ukraine, the official replied: “We certainly have helped with the trans-shipment of some additional spare parts that have helped with their aircraft needs, but we have not transported whole aircraft,” implying the US hadn’t transferred any of the rotary-wing aircraft from the Pentagon’s own armory till then, and instead a third country had delivered fixed-wing aircraft to Ukraine.

Rather than an oversight on the part of the Pentagon spokesman, the comedy of errors appeared to be a result of lack of coordination between military authorities of Ukraine and the United States. The real reason Ukraine’s air force officials want to keep aircraft transfer under the wraps is that previously Russian forces claimed to have [destroyed](#) an S-300 air defense system that Slovakia transferred to Ukraine in a Kalibr cruise missiles strike hitting a hangar on the southern outskirts of the city of Dnepropetrovsk.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu [boasted last month](#) that 123 of Ukraine’s 152 fighter jets had been destroyed, as well as 77 of its 149 helicopters and 152 of its 180 long- and medium-range air defense systems, while its naval forces had been totally eliminated.

As demilitarization of Ukraine, alongside denazification and liberation of Donbas, was one of the principal objectives of Russia’s month-long military campaign lasting from late February to late March, therefore Russian forces would never allow vital military assets, especially air defense systems and fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, to remain in the possession of Ukraine’s air force. Ukraine’s aircraft are safe only as long as they remain grounded and concealed from Russia’s advanced air surveillance systems.

Although the Pentagon spokesman refused to identify the country that delivered the aircraft to Ukraine due to secrecy of the shady transfer deal, the only NATO member state that was in talks with Washington and Kyiv to transfer its Soviet-era fleet of a dozen MiG-29 aircraft was Slovakia.

Reportedly, a batch of Ukraine’s highly skilled pilots traveled to Slovakia last week, took the delivery of the aircraft and then flew them all the way to concealed air force hangars at military airports in Kyiv while maintaining low altitudes in order to avoid detection by Russia’s advanced air surveillance systems. The Pentagon that has [deployed extensive ISR](#), or intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, assets along Ukraine’s borders fully coordinated the entire clandestine operation of transferring the aircraft.

After the scuttled [aircraft-transfer deal](#) that would've seen Poland handing over its fleet of 28 Soviet-era MiG-29s to Ukraine in return for the United States "backfilling" the Polish Air Force with American F-16s last month, Slovakia was in talks with NATO about an arrangement that could allow Bratislava to send fighter jets to Ukraine, Prime Minister Eduard Heger [told reporters](#) on April 11.

Eduard Heger said his government wanted to "move away from reliance on the Soviet MiGs" in any case. "This is equipment that we want to finish anyway, because we're waiting for the F-16s," he added, referring to US-made jets that Slovakia was scheduled to receive in 2024, though Bratislava could receive American fighter jets earlier as it has now delivered on the pledge of transferring the dozen MiG-29 aircraft Slovakia was reported to have to Ukraine.

In early March, Poland made a similar offer of transferring its fleet of 28 Soviet-era MiG-29s to Ukraine in return for receiving American F-16s, but the Pentagon [rejected the proposal](#) due to apprehensions over direct confrontation with Russian forces in Ukraine.

The prospect of flying combat aircraft from NATO territory into the war zone "raises serious concerns for the entire NATO alliance," the Pentagon said on March 9. "It is simply not clear to us that there is a substantive rationale for it," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby added.

But considering that Slovak aircraft have already been delivered to Ukraine, it seems plausible that the Polish proposal of transferring its aircraft might also be reconsidered by the Biden administration and Ukraine could receive additional Polish MiG-29 aircraft in the coming weeks.

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