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It's All About Ukraine

Two Chance Meetings While Traveling in Europe

by DAVE LINDORFF

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On a trip to Europe for a two-week stay in Finland, my wife and I at one point found ourselves seated next to a congenial 30-something guy, dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt. He said he was US Army major.

Initially, our conversation revolved around his little kids, and his complaint about how often he was sent out on “short assignments” in Europe far away from home. He also mentioned being somewhat hard of hearing after having been sent out on 250 missions in Iraq as a soldier in the cavalry, where he had been the gunner on a stryker armored vehicle. (He explained that he couldn’t wear ear protectors despite the constant loud roar of the heavy vehicle’s engine, “because you have to hear when you’re taking fire, and also to be able to communicate with the other guys inside the vehicle.”)

He was voluble, but discreet when it came to his current Army role, saying only that he had been reassigned from cavalry to “international relations,” which he later explained meant “handling relations” between US military forces and various countries’ militaries in the “European Theater.” He said he had become particularly busy since the beginning of the “Ukraine crisis,” but wouldn’t go into detail about what he was busy doing.

One could make an educated guess. Looking at the bulging muscles on this guy's arms, shoulders and chest, it seemed clear that this was not a someone who just who sat at conferences and talked across tables discussing protocol. More likely, he was Special Forces in some training capacity.

In any event, his regular travels, which he said had him flying back and forth from the US to assignments in Europe almost every other week, make suggest that the US has ramped up in its military activities in Europe.

Later, in Finland, I made a road trip from the southern city of Kuopio to northern Lapland above the Arctic Circle, to report on arctic climate change. Just before reaching the Arctic Circle on my first evening on the road, I came on two young people, a man and a woman, who were hitchhiking. Being a long-time hitchhiker myself, and deeply in karmic debt as a driver, I immediately pulled over and invited them to hop in.

They turned out to be two Ukrainians from Kiev, both just out of college. The young man, Vladimir, was trained as an engineer. The young woman, Svetlana, was a communications grad. She spoke better English than Vlad. They explained that they had left Ukraine a month earlier in a group of some 100 young people, "to find work, and to get away from the war." At the time Ukraine had no conscription, but this month conscription was reimposed for all men between 18 and 25, with the potential, as the army is getting routed, of all males up to 60 getting called up. So they left for good reason. Protests, with mothers saying they won't let their sons be sent off to fight, are reportedly spreading [1] all over western Ukraine against conscription (though this is not being mentioned in the US corporate media).

Both Vladimir and Svetlana said that they had no interest in fighting the rebels in eastern Ukraine, and they said that the Ukrainian government installed after rioters ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich was "completely corrupt."

They added that there was no prospect for work in Ukraine — not even for communications majors and engineers. Only for soldiers. But the people aren't really interested in being soldiers, or in fighting, which explains the army's high desertion rate and its poor performance in the field against eastern Ukraine's rebels. Only in the militias, which are filled with volunteer fascist Ukrainian ultra-nationalists, does one find people who want to fight.

I thought today of those two kids, who have obtained temporary summer work visas to pick berries in Finland, and wondered what will happen to them when the Finnish agricultural season ends in mid September and their visas expire. Given the marked anti-immigrant position of most of the European Union states, it seems unlikely that they would have much luck claiming refugee status as Ukrainian citizens.

I suspect that they are only a small sample of a huge wave of Ukrainians who are fleeing the disaster that has been created in Ukraine courtesy of US State Department and CIA meddling in that country. According to Moscow news reports, about a million people have fled Ukraine for Russia, mostly to avoid savage and indiscriminate bombing of eastern Ukraine cities and towns by the Ukrainian military. About an equal number of Ukrainians has also reportedly fled eastern

Ukraine, most, like my two hitchhikers, trying to avoid the civil war and the draft, and to find work, which is unavailable in Ukraine.

I dropped off my passengers a little south of Kuusamo at a campsite where there were lots of others like them, all from Ukraine, living in tents. Svetlana handed me what she said was a nearly worthless Ukrainian one-Hyrvnia note “for good luck,” and invited me to stop back at their campsite on my return from Lapland, where they promised that their compatriots would be playing instruments and singing Ukrainian folksongs in the evenings.

I hope that they manage to stay well away from their chaotic and violent homeland until things clear up there. I hope too that the separatist rebels quickly trounce the Ukrainian army and the militia thugs who have been tormenting the Russian minority in eastern Ukraine, so some semblance of peace can return, and so that US army guy we met ends up being sent back home with nothing to do but play with his kids and watch them grow.