The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Rifle-Wielding Granny Prepares to Battle Rebels in Ukraine

January 13, 2015



Ekateryna Bilyk

A 68-year-old woman wearing a headscarf, sprightly marching across frozen fields, and jauntily wielding an automatic rifle is perhaps not the image that springs to mind when thinking of the word "soldier."

But since the aspiring fighter from the Lviv region showed up at a military training course for civilians this weekend, she has emerged as a bit of a celebrity on Ukraine's social networks, after video footage and photographs of her practicing during drills were posted online.

Although Ekateryna Bilyk has passed retirement age, she continues to teach mathematics at a village school in Mlynyska, Ukraine's Depo.ua news site reported Sunday, adding that the woman is widowed and lives with her daughter and grandson.

And while the military volunteer training that she attended was meant for local people aged 18 to 40, Bilyk was not going to let something as insignificant as her age deter her, according

to the report.

"My grandson read on the Internet about those courses and told me about it," she was quoted as saying. "And I said: 'Attaboy, learning to defend the Motherland is such a good thing! Especially when people are paying attention to you and teaching you — that's beautiful! I'll go, too.' And I went."

But her plans were nearly foiled at the last minute, with her grandson driving off early in the morning with his friends after appearing to find the idea of military training with his grandmother a bit embarrassing, organizer Volodymyr Havron was quoted by Depo.ua as saying.

Not to be dissuaded by the lack of a ride, the determined woman walked to the training site on foot, he added.

With Ukraine's government forces battling pro-Moscow separatists in the east of the country, Kiev-loyal men, and a number of young women, from western and central regions have been signing up as volunteers.

But soldiers past the retirement age are rare, and instructors had initially refused to hand out an automatic rifle to the unlikely recruit, Depo.ua reported.

"But I told them: 'And what am I going to do if the same thing as in Donetsk and Luhansk starts happening, what am I going to do with separatists?'" Bilyk was quoted as saying. "And they gave me an automatic rifle and taught me to shoot."

"They showed us how separatists attack in groups of five, and how to fight them back," she said, adding: "Very useful knowledge."

A video posted online showed Bilyk marching with much younger male recruits along a frozen dirt road, going down on one knee to take aim with an automatic rifle on a firing range, and rolling across a field to practice shooting from a gun held above her head.

Although Bilyk is too old to fight in the Ukrainian army, she said she would be happy to travel as far as Moscow to settle a score with Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose administration is blamed by Kiev and Western governments for the violence in eastern Ukraine.

"I would get to Putin if they gave me a hand grenade," she was quoted by Depo.ua as saying. "I would sneak up to him and kill him and die myself. So that he does not kill our grandchildren, creep."

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