

III. International

Elon Musk, Big Tech, and NATO's Proxy War in Ukraine

by Harley Schlanger

Sept. 22—The pre-release from Walter Isaacson's forthcoming biography, *Elon Musk*, claims that the tech entrepreneur and multi-billionaire deactivated his Starlink satellite system's coverage near the Crimean coast to prevent a Ukrainian attack on the Russian Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol. This generated an intense debate over his alleged action. Several U.S. Senators demanded an investigation and a spokesman for Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Musk of defending "war criminals" who "desire to commit murder."

It turns out that, just as so much of the coverage of the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine has been disinformation, this story featured a false claim, which was corrected by Musk. He said that his company, which provides Ukraine access to the Starlink



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SpaceX gives Ukraine access to its Starlink system for battlefield management. According to Elon Musk, SpaceX CEO and CTO, that system was never activated to enable targetting of Crimea. Shown, the first batch of 60 Starlink internet satellites shown against the backdrop of their destination—low Earth orbit. May 24, 2019.

system for its defense, had not been deactivated against targeting of Crimea, because it had never been turned on in that area!

Musk posted this clarification on “X” (formerly Twitter) in which he confirmed:

There was an emergency request from [Ukrainian] government authorities to activate Starlink all the way to Sevastopol. The obvious intent being to sink most of the Russian fleet at anchor.... If I had agreed to their request, then Space X would be explicitly complicit in a major act of war and conflict escalation.

Musk had stated earlier that had such an attack succeeded in sinking Russia’s fleet, “it would have been like a mini-Pearl Harbor,” and could have triggered a nuclear war.

Starlink, a system of Musk’s SpaceX company, is a constellation of thousands of low Earth orbit satellites, which provides low-latency broadband internet service to users in over 60 countries. It has been reported that Musk provided at least 15,000 Starlink kits to Ukraine, to users who had lost internet access due to Russian GPS jamming. Starlink allows Ukrainian battlefield troops to remain connected, and provides targeting data to knock out incoming Russian drones and strike Russian targets at night, according to a Sept. 24 [report](#) in the London *Times*.

Ukrainian Reaction

A leading adviser to President Zelensky spared no words in a post attacking Musk. Mikhailo Podolyak reacted to Musk’s warning about the danger of escalation with a typically unhinged blast. He described the decision to not allow access to Starlink for an attack on the Russian fleet: “Sometimes a mistake is much more than just a mistake.” Accusing Starlink of “interference” with Ukrainian plans, Podolyak claimed Musk—

allowed this fleet to fire Kalibr missiles at Ukrainian cities. As a result, civilians, children are being killed. This is the price of a cocktail of ignorance and big ego.... Why do some people so desperately want to defend war criminals and their desire to commit murder? Do they now re-

alize that they are committing evil and encouraging evil?

This was not Podolyak’s first attack on Musk. In December 2022, in response to Musk’s call that October for a negotiated settlement to the war—including Ukraine accepting Russian control of Crimea—he accused Musk of pushing a “magical simple solution,” and added that Ukraine would never accept “trading land for peace.”

Less diplomatic was the response to this proposal from Andrei Melnyk, the former Ukraine Ambassador to Germany. Melnyk tweeted an expletive-laced answer to Musk’s suggestion, writing:

Fuck off is my very diplomatic reply to you.... The only outcome is that now no Ukrainian will EVER buy your f...ing tesla crap. So good luck to you....

Melnyk was removed as ambassador following his open defense of the Banderite neo-Nazi networks embedded in Ukraine’s defense and security forces.

The bigger issue—somewhat eclipsed by the flap over Musk’s defense of his decision not to allow Starlink to be used against the Russian fleet—is the overall role of Big Tech firms in the war. This was addressed by the U.S. Secretary of the Air Force, General Frank Kendall, speaking with reporters on Sept. 11 of the possibility that private vendors in the future could refuse to provide services requested by the military.

If we’re going to rely upon commercial architecture or commercial systems for operational use, then we have to have some assurances that they are going to be available.... Otherwise, they are a convenience and maybe an economy in peacetime, but they’re not something we can rely upon in wartime.

What U.S. Democratic Senators Elizabeth Warren, Chuck Schumer, and others are demanding is that the government receive iron-clad assurances from tech CEOs that they will fully integrate with the war machine, and be accountable to its officials.

While Musk initially provided Starlink to Ukraine for free, the *Washington Post* reports that there was a subsequent official contractual agreement obligating the U.S. military to pay for the services. This has not been limited to Starlink. According to Mykhailo Fedorov, Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation, Twitter has been "an efficient tool ... to counter Russian military aggression. It's our smart and peaceful tool [!] to destroy the Russian economy."

A [report](#) posted Sept. 5, 2023, by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) provides a glimpse of the extent to which so-called Big Tech firms have become a key component of NATO's war against Russia. The summary states:

Private companies have played a huge role [which requires] a different approach ... in the way state and private companies interact...

Big U.S. tech companies, and smaller more specialized firms, have provided high-technology and cyber support and have allowed Ukraine to move its data to the cloud and digitise the battlefield.

Among the technologies used are drones, satellites, and AI-enabled software.

The ECFR report quotes the President of Microsoft, Brad Smith, who said:

This is not a way just between Russia and Ukraine.... It involves an alliance of companies that are supporting Ukraine, and an alliance of tech companies.

Smith justified his firm's involvement, saying that getting involved was at first "unusual and uncomfortable, but became indispensable for the protection of our customers."

Among those identified in the ECFR report as involved in the war are:

- Google. Its Project Shield software creates a "cyber umbrella" to protect Ukraine's websites from attack.

- Microsoft. Has estimated its support to Ukraine in 2022–23 alone to be worth \$400 million.

- Palantir. CEO Alex Karp says that data analysis from his company has improved "targeting functions" from tanks to artillery, and is "responsible for most of the targeting in Ukraine."

Military-Tech-Industrial Complex Profits

The conclusion of the report: "Private tech companies are playing an ever more important role in warfare." In 2022, Ukraine awarded "peace prizes" to U.S. Tech firms, including Google, Microsoft Azure Cloud Services, and Amazon Web Services, for their support for the war effort.

Not all of these services are "donated" by the companies involved, as the case of Starlink shows, in which government funding was added to the initial gift from Musk. A Sept. 5 press release from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) reports that it has provided a whopping \$22.9 billion in direct budget support for the war since it began Feb. 24, 2022, with \$15.5 billion already disbursed. The total USAID budget for 2023 is just over \$60 billion, which means that a significant share of its budget, which is a major part of U.S. "foreign aid" for purposes of funding development projects in poor nations, is allocated to support Ukraine's tech sector, to fund the war! USAID's Director is Samantha Power, who has a long history as a war-hawk with ties to Presidents Obama and Biden.

Big Tech's contribution to the U.S.-UK-NATO war is not limited to kinetic warfare capabilities. Many of the companies involved, including YouTube (a Google company), Amazon, Microsoft, and Twitter, have been exposed as part of the Disinformation and Censorship Industrial Complex, which has been engaged in silencing opposition to that war.

Ironically, that exposure was aided by Elon Musk himself, when he opened the Twitter files, which showed the extent to which U.S. intelligence/security agencies—such as the FBI, CIA, and Department of Homeland Security, as well as the U.S. Congress—were involved in censoring opposition to the war, and targeting opponents as mouthpieces for Russian President Vladimir Putin. Now Ukrainian officials, and some Members of Congress, accuse Musk of being among those "information terrorists."