Donetsk (Ukraine) - A NATO project to disarm mines might be expanded across East Europe.

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In this struggling coal town in Eastern Ukraine, any job for a young woman is a find, but Yulia Lednova especially prizes hers.

For the locally competitive sum of $100 a month, she removes the detonators from land mines - the first step in recycling the weapons into plastic pelicans and other toys for children.

Her work is part of a NATO-sponsored demilitarization pilot project that officials say could become the biggest arms-destruction project in the world. NATO representatives say Ukraine has valuable expertise in destroying arms which could be used to reduce dangerous stockpiles across East Europe.

"I start work each day with the next row of land mines," says Ms. Lednova, blushing shyly as she explains her job. "I can feel the menace and evil in them."

Putting the mines inside a protective box, she operates a mechanism that pulls out the detonator. "Each mine I pick up is one less mine that might kill or disable someone," she says. "It feels good to be doing something useful and positive."

Financed with an $800,000 grant from Germany, Greece, and Turkey, the mines-to-toys pilot project will assess Ukraine's will and technical ability to destroy its own huge arsenals of antiquated arms and munitions.

If NATO members decide to continue the funding through the Partnership for Peace Trust Fund, the project will go on to destroy 1.5 million small arms and 133,000 tons of ammunition in Ukraine and may be extended to even larger stockpiles in Russia. That kind of program would require a budget of tens of millions of dollars, analysts say.

Michel Duray, director of the NATO Information and Documentation Center in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, is optimistic about the project, despite recent tension between Ukraine and Western nations over alleged illegal arms sales.

"This is potentially the biggest armament-destruction program in the world," he says. "Our experience here has been very impressive, and this is the first time we have attempted such a project in a former-Soviet country. This project has demonstrated that Ukraine is able to fulfill its commitments, and it matches the high-quality relationship we usually have with Ukraine."

Last summer, Lednova and 39 other employees of the Donetsk State Chemical Plant - many of whom used to make missiles, artillery shells and grenades for the Soviet army - were told they had one year to dismantle 400,000 land mines and recycle the materials for civilian purposes. The technicians then devised a way to refine the plastic mine casings into plastic pelicans and sandbox tool sets, most of which have been donated to a local orphanage.

Lednova and her colleagues have been so enthusiastic about their task that the project is several months ahead of schedule. The plant is expected to have reached its target before the end of this month. "This is by far the best job I have ever had," says Lednova, "and I hope there will be more work like this for us."

Ukrainian officials are also eager to cooperate. When the Red Army withdrew from Ukraine in the 1990s, it left behind huge stores of weapons, munitions, and equipment dating back to World War II and even World War I. Many of the explosives have become unstable and pose a danger to local populations.

In addition, several high-profile cases of Ukrainian weapons being sold on the black market - including allegations that arms went to Iraq - have increased concern about the security of Ukrainian arsenals.

"There is significant danger that, if large arsenals of weapons are left lying around in this country, they will be sold to unfriendly countries or terrorists," says Mykola Siruk, editor of the Ukrainian journal Defense Express. "I don't blame Western governments for worrying. It is not difficult to sell these weapons. The Ukrainian Army is in crisis, and there is total chaos around the arsenals."

The mines-to-toys project is a key element in efforts to demilitarize Ukraine and transform the cumbersome military-industrial complex it inherited from the USSR. At the end of the Soviet era, armaments and other military industries accounted for 25 to 35 percent of the Ukrainian economy. After a decade of economic collapse and budgetary crisis, Ukraine's armed forces have been cut by two-thirds and military enterprises account for less than 5 percent of economic production.

"Military industries have been forced to drastically adapt to the times," says Nikolay Sungurovsky, a military analyst for the nongovernmental
says Nikolay Sungurovsky, a military analyst for the nongovernmental Ukrainian Center for Economic and Policy Studies. "The government doesn't have resources to pour into a huge military industry and the once guaranteed Soviet market disappeared almost overnight. This has forced many factories to close, and others have had to learn to make something else."

Besides the mines-to-toys project, other examples include a factory in central Ukraine that is developing a system to make safer industrial explosives out of solid rocket fuel, and a group of farmers in western Ukraine who last year converted tanks from a local military factory into tractors. While those tractors still resemble tanks, the Donetsk toys look nothing like the mine cases they once were.

"It is fitting that we make toys out of the mines," says Yelena Kazakova, who has worked at the plant for 15 years. "Land mines are a horrible weapon because they kill mainly non-combatants, many of them children. I think all land mines in the world should be destroyed, and I hope we can make a good start on that."

Ukraine has 6.4 million antipersonnel mines, the fourth-largest stockpile in the world after China, Russia, and the United States. The Ukrainian government recently signed the International Land Mine Ban, which, once it is ratified by Parliament, will compel the country to dispose of its stockpiles. That alone should keep the workers at the Donetsk plant busy for quite some time.

"We would be happy to destroy land mines from other countries," says chief engineer Grigory Volodchenko. "We want to work and we are good at what we do.... Perhaps someday we will be allowed to dismantle Russian or even American mines."

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