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Land board's Russian assets dwindle

Much divestment occurred before Ukraine invasion

AMY R. SISK
Bismarck Tribune

The amount of money from North Dakota's various educational trusts that is tied to Russia has fallen significantly over the past few weeks as state officials work to cut financial ties to that

country.

Money the state collects through grazing and oil development on state-owned land is invested in numerous funds to benefit K-12 schools, colleges and other public institutions across North Dakota. Collections currently total \$6 billion, \$20 million of which was invested in Russian securities before Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24. Since then, the state's investment in Russian securities has fallen to \$4 million

as investors across the world have rushed to pull their money from the country.

The Department of Trust Lands' director of investments, Michael Shackelford, has been speaking with managers of funds in which the state has invested money to encourage them to divest from "Russian exposure" and comply with government sanctions. He said "everyone is moving in the right direction" at varying paces. "We have no ability to legally

direct them to do anything, but we have made clear our view of what should happen," he told members of the Board of University and School Lands on Wednesday. "Quite frankly, the comments got back were, 'You and everybody else.' So we are not alone."

The state is one of many investors in those funds. Trading in Russian securities has seized up across the world, and it will be more difficult to continue to divest because nobody

wants to buy, Shackelford said.

Several factors account for the drop in money the state trusts have tied to Russia, Shackelford said. Much of the decline can be attributed to money managers choosing to divest from the country before the invasion began, he said. Continued investments in Russia also are losing value.

Gov. Doug Burgum noted that the trusts are performing well in

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MIKE MCCLARY, TRIBUNE

DeMonte Evans, left, and Kevin Hartson are on trial at the Burleigh County Courthouse for the March 28, 2021, killing of Reonardo Alexis in Bismarck.

Trial opens in fatal shooting

2 defendants face charges of murder

TRAVIS SVIHOVEC
Bismarck Tribune

Puzzlelike pieces of evidence will come together to form a clear picture of the case against two men accused of murder in a shooting a year ago in Bismarck, prosecutors say, but defense attorneys maintain that picture isn't as sharp when other puzzle pieces are viewed.

Attorneys made opening statements Wednesday in the murder trial of Kevin Hartson, 30, and Devante Evans, 27. The Burleigh Morton Detention Center lists Hartson's city of residence as

Bismarck and Evans' as Detroit. They are accused of killing Reonardo Alexis, 26, of Bismarck, and injuring another man at a Mapleton Avenue apartment the night of March 28, 2021.

A potential motive isn't clear, though police at the time said the alleged incident may have arisen over a drug transaction.

Both defendants are charged with murder, which carries a possible life sentence upon conviction. Evans also faces felony aggravated assault, reckless endangerment and firearms charges, plus a misdemeanor count of wearing a mask during the commission of a crime.

Hartson and Evans were arrested during a traffic stop in

Douglas, Arizona, a few days after the shooting. It's unclear if they were planning to cross into Mexico.

Prosecutors say physical evidence, photographs and DNA will connect the defendants to Alexis's death. Police responding to 911 calls found a Timberland tag, cellphone, shell casing and Playboy bunny hat outside the Bismarck apartment. At the Mandan apartment the men left, police later found Timberland boots and a Playboy bunny tag, "the type you get when you buy an item in a store and remove it before you wear it," Assistant Burleigh County State's Attorney Joshua Amundson said.

DNA from the cap was a match

for Hartson, the prosecutor said. GPS technology will show the car the men borrowed in Mandan was driven to the Bismarck apartment, stayed there for a short time, and left about the time 911 calls were made, the prosecutor said.

Police also found drugs, drug paraphernalia and cash in the apartment, according to Amundson. The men who were killed and injured aren't saints, "but Reonardo Alexis did not deserve to get shot, and Valentin Hidalgo Rojas did not deserve to have his hand injured," Amundson said.

He did not offer a potential

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Dems give up on virus funding

Congress reaches a deal on budget

ALAN FRAM
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House moved Wednesday toward approving a massive spending bill anchored by \$13.6 billion for battered Ukraine and its European allies after top Democrats abruptly dropped their plan to also include fresh funds to battle COVID-19.

The House was sure to approve the Ukraine aid and the \$1.5 trillion government-wide legislation containing it, which leaders were trying to push to passage Wednesday night.

Senate approval, also assured, would be next, by week's end or perhaps longer.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said it was "heart-breaking" to abandon the \$15.6 billion for combatting the pandemic, a top priority for President Joe Biden and party leaders. The money was mostly to bolster U.S. supplies of vaccines, treatments and tests and battle the disease around the world, but a Democratic revolt over Republican-demanded state aid cuts to cover the new initiatives' costs forced her to abandon that spending.

"We've got a war going on in Ukraine," Pelosi told reporters, explaining the urgency Democrats felt in making concessions in bargaining with Republicans. "We have important work that we're doing here."

She said with her party in the 50-50 Senate needing at least 10 GOP votes to pass legislation, Democrats "are going to have to know there has to be compromise."

The Ukraine aid included \$6.5 billion for the U.S. costs of sending troops and weapons to Eastern Europe and equipping allied forces there in response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion and repeated, bellicose threats. There was another \$6.8 billion to care for refugees and provide economic aid

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Airstrike hits Ukraine maternity hospital

ASSOCIATED PRESS

MARIUPOL, Ukraine — A Russian airstrike devastated a maternity hospital Wednesday in the besieged port city of Mariupol and wounded at least 17 people, Ukrainian officials said, amid growing warnings from the West that Moscow's invasion is about to take a more brutal and

indiscriminate turn.

The ground shook more than a mile away when the Mariupol complex was hit by a series of blasts that blew out windows and ripped away much of the front of one building. Police and soldiers rushed to scene to evacuate victims, carrying out a heavily pregnant and bleeding woman on a

stretcher.

Another woman wailed as she clutched her child. In the courtyard, mangled cars burned, and a blast crater extended at least two stories deep.

"Today Russia committed a huge crime," said Volodymyr Nikulin, a top regional police official, standing in the wreckage.

"It is a war crime without any justification."

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote on Twitter that there were "people, children under the wreckage" and called the strike an "atrocious." Video shared by Zelenskyy showed cheerfully

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Divestment

From AI

other areas. Overall, their value is down just \$9 million in recent weeks despite the \$25 million

drop tied to Russian securities. Burgum chairs the five-member land board, which oversees the Department of Trust Lands. They are not the only North Dakota entities with investments tied to Russia.

The 12-member State Investment Board last week voted to divest public money with Russian ties. At the time, the board had \$10 million with "Russian entity exposure," a drop from nearly \$16 million just days ear-

lier due to money managers' divestments, investments' devalued worth and halted transaction activity. The state Retirement and Investment Office is expected to update the board later this month about its di-

vestment from Russia. (Reporter Jack Dura contributed to this story.)

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Trial

From AI

motive.

The truth of the case, Evans' attorney Dean Gregory said, is about unexplained evidence, evidence tampering and "police tunnel vision." Police when they found the owner of the hat and the cellphone

determined "We've got our shooters. Case closed," Gregory said. "No other possible scenario was investigated. None."

Neither Hartson's nor Evans' DNA was found on the two shell casings inside the apartment, but Rojas' was, Gregory said. Alexis bought a weapon in the days before the shooting, and another person took evidence from the

apartment after the incident, Gregory said, adding that those were puzzle pieces "the state didn't tell you about."

"Our position is what the state says happened is not what happened," Gregory said.

The question that matters most in the case is "why," Hartson's attorney Jackson Lofgren said, adding, "That's the one they're going

to be least able to show to you."

The state knows Hartson didn't have a gun, didn't shoot a gun and didn't kill anyone, Lofgren said. The only way "to rope Mr. Hartson into this crime of murder," he said, was to charge him with an offense that links him to a homicide that occurred during the commission of a robbery or felonious restraint.

"That's the foundation of this

whole house of cards," Lofgren said.

Nine women and four men are on the jury. One of them will be an alternate. The trial started with jury selection Tuesday and is scheduled for nine days.

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Congress

From AI

to allies, and more to help federal agencies enforce economic sanctions against Russia and protect against cyber threats at home.

Biden had requested \$10 billion to respond to Russia's invasion.

Pelosi said she talked to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for 45 minutes Wednesday. She said they discussed the weapons and other assistance his country needs and "the crimes against humanity that Putin is committing," including a Russian airstrike that destroyed a maternity hospital. "This is the beast that Putin is," Pelosi said.

While enmity toward Putin and a desire to send assistance to the region is virtually universal in Congress, lawmakers have had a hard time finding unity on other steps. In one area of agreement, the House was also planning to vote on a bill banning Russian oil imports — Biden imposed such a ban this week — and levying other sanctions, underscoring lawmakers' eagerness to demonstrate they're taking action.

Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., called the \$1.5 trillion measure a "reasonable compromise" and said its extra defense spending was "clearly necessary in the wake of Vladimir Putin's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine."



JACQUELYN MARTIN, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., speaks to the media Thursday on Capitol Hill in Washington.



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., looks over his notes Tuesday before taking questions from reporters at the Capitol in Washington.

In a remarkable and widespread rank-and-file rebellion, Democratic lawmakers froze the House into inactivity for most of Wednesday. Their demand: a refusal to accept Republicans' insistence that the new COVID-19 spending be paid for with cuts in previously enacted pandemic aid to 30 states.

Pelosi eventually relented and decided to remove all pandemic spending from the government-wide, \$1.5 trillion package. That underscored the pressure Congress feels to help Ukraine resist the Russian invasion before it's too late and to help nearby nations bolster their militaries and absorb over 2 million refugees

fleeing the fighting.

After dropping the COVID-19 money from the huge bill, the House planned to vote on a separate measure providing the full \$15.6 billion, without cutting state aid. It was expected to pass but face an uphill fight in the Senate, where strong GOP opposition seemed likely.

The \$1.5 trillion measure and its 2,741 pages were designed to keep agencies functioning through Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year. Since it began Oct. 1, the government has functioned on short-term measures that prevented federal shutdowns but held programs to levels agreed to under

President Donald Trump.

The new bill is infused with election-year victories for both parties. Democrats won a 6.7% increase over last year in domestic programs, to a total of \$730 billion. Republicans were able to boost defense programs to \$782 billion, a 5.6% increase.

Last spring, Biden proposed increases of 16% for domestic and just 2% for defense programs for this year. Neither was ever realistic because of Democrats' tiny congressional majorities.

Since then, Russia's pummeling of Ukraine made it impossible for Democrats to resist defense increases. The relentless pandemic,

families' growing costs from inflation and collapse of Biden's huge social and environment bill made it harder to stop Democrats from winning domestic boosts.

The bill would increase spending for child nutrition and child care, local law enforcement, improving broadband in rural areas, and education aid for disabled students and historically Black colleges and universities.

The IRS would get an infusion to whittle down a big backlog of tax returns, and there would be boosts for veterans' medical care, biomedical research and processing migrants entering the U.S. at the southwestern border.

Ukraine

From AI

painted hallways strewn with twisted metal.

"There are few things more depraved than targeting the vulnerable and defenseless," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted, adding that Russian President Vladimir Putin will be held "to account for his terrible crimes."

Meanwhile, the Pentagon on Wednesday slammed the door on plans to provide MiG fighter jets to Ukraine, even through a second country, calling it a "high-risk" venture that would not significantly change the effectiveness of the Ukrainian Air Force.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with his Polish counterpart on Wednesday and told him the U.S. assessment. He said the U.S. is pursuing other options that would provide more critical military needs to Ukraine such as air defense and anti-air weapons systems.

Poland had said it was prepared to hand over MiG-29 planes to NATO that could be delivered to Ukraine, but Kirby said U.S. intelligence concluded that it could be considered escalatory and trigger a "significant" Russian reaction.

Authorities, meanwhile, announced new cease-fires Wednesday morning to allow thousands of civilians to escape from bombarded towns around Kyiv as well as the cities of Mariupol, Enerhodar and Volnovakha in the south, Izum in the east and Sumy in the northeast.

It was not immediately clear whether anyone was able to leave other cities, but people streamed out of Kyiv's suburbs, many headed for the city center, as explosions were heard in the capital and air raid sirens sounded repeatedly.

From there, the evacuees planned to board trains bound for western Ukrainian regions not under attack.

Civilians leaving the Kyiv suburb of Irpin were forced to make their way across the slippery wooden planks of a makeshift bridge, because the Ukrainians blew up the concrete span to Kyiv



EVGENIY MALOLETKA PHOTOS, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ukrainian emergency employees and volunteers carry an injured pregnant woman from a maternity hospital damaged by shelling Wednesday in Mariupol, Ukraine.



An injured pregnant woman walks downstairs in a maternity hospital heavily damaged by Russian shelling Wednesday in Mariupol, Ukraine.

days ago to slow the Russian advance.

Previous attempts to establish safe evacuation corridors over the

past few days largely failed because of what the Ukrainians said were Russian attacks. But Putin, in a telephone call with Germa-

ny's chancellor, accused militant Ukrainian nationalists of hampering the evacuations.

In Mariupol, a strategic city

of 430,000 people on the Sea of Azov, local authorities hurried to bury the dead from the past two weeks of fighting in a mass grave. City workers dug a trench some 25 yards long at one of the city's old cemeteries and made the sign of the cross as they pushed bodies wrapped in carpets or bags over the edge.

About 1,200 people have died in the nine-day siege of the city, Zelenskyy's office said.

Nationwide, thousands are thought to have been killed, both civilians and soldiers, since Putin's forces invaded. The U.N. estimates more than 2 million people have fled the country, the biggest exodus of refugees in Europe since the end of World War II.

The fighting knocked out power to the decommissioned Chernobyl nuclear plant, raising fears about the spent radioactive fuel that is stored at the site and must be kept cool. But the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency said it saw "no critical impact on safety" from the loss of power.

The crisis is likely to get worse as Moscow's forces step up their bombardment of cities in response to what appear to be stronger Ukrainian resistance and heavier Russian losses than anticipated.

Echoing remarks from the director of the CIA a day earlier, British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said Russia's assault will get "more brutal and more indiscriminate" as Putin tries to regain momentum.

Britain's Defense Ministry said fighting continued northwest of Kyiv. The cities of Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy and Mariupol were being heavily shelled and remained encircled by Russian forces.

Russian forces are placing military equipment on farms and amid residential buildings in the northern city of Chernihiv, Ukraine's military said. In the south, Russians in civilian clothes are advancing on the city of Mykolaiv, a Black Sea shipbuilding center of a half-million people, it said.

The Ukrainian military, meanwhile, is building up defenses in cities in the north, south and east, and forces around Kyiv are "holding the line" against the Russian offensive, authorities said.