

# Putin's Promise to Withdraw Troops Leaves Observers Cautiously Optimistic

By [Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber](#)

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A pro-Russian separatist in a balaclava mans a fortified frontline rebel position Monday on the outskirts of Semenivka, a village in eastern Ukraine.

President Vladimir Putin ordered the Defense Ministry to withdraw troops from Russia's border with Ukraine on Monday in what analysts said was a sign of the Kremlin's willingness to deescalate tensions with Kiev and the West, despite ongoing clashes in eastern Ukraine.

While Putin's statement was greeted with skepticism by some observers, who pointed out it was the third time Russia had announced its intention to withdraw troops from its border with Ukraine, the order was Putin's most concrete statement on the issue, and both independent and pro-Kremlin analysts agreed that it was likely a case of third time lucky.

The statement released on the Kremlin's website Monday said that troops deployed at military grounds in the Rostov, Belgorod and Bryansk regions — which all border Ukraine — have been ordered to retreat to their usual garrisons. Earlier this month, Putin

claimed that troops were being withdrawn from the region and in March, the Kremlin announced a partial withdrawal of its soldiers.

"We have to understand that decisions like these are taken sequentially," said Igor Korotchenko, chairman of the Public Council of the Defense Ministry. "When the president announced earlier that troops were being withdrawn, you cannot expect troops to vanish overnight. This latest announcement confirms that the troops will be fully withdrawn."

The U.S. and NATO last week contradicted Russia's previous claims about withdrawing its troops from the border region with Ukraine.

The U.S. government published commercial satellite images that it said demonstrated Russia had not withdrawn its troops from the region. One of the images, dated May 9, showed what appear to be Russian helicopters in Belgorod. Another image from Rostov, located 75 kilometers from the Ukrainian border, appeared to show Russian armored vehicles.

NATO also claimed that Russia had 40,000 "high-readiness troops" massed at its border with Ukraine. NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen said at a news conference Monday that he could not confirm that Russian troops were now being withdrawn.

The Kremlin's latest statement, which did not provide a timeline for the withdrawal of troops or specify what proportion of them would be pulled, said that "President Vladimir Putin welcomes the first contacts between Kiev and supporters of the federalization [of Ukraine]" to establish direct dialogue with the parties involved in the crisis.

Igor Bunin, director of the Moscow-based Center for Political Technologies, an independent think tank, said that the Kremlin's latest announcement was a positive sign for the deescalation of tensions in Ukraine.

"We are talking about completely removing the troops from the area," Bunin said. "This decision will move them far away, not just a few kilometers away as we saw before. This is a significant step in easing tensions."

Pro-Kremlin observers have also noted that Putin's latest announcement could deflate the information wars on the civil conflict in Ukraine.

"By ordering the withdrawal of troops, Putin is depriving certain political circles of an opportunity to berate Russia," Vladimir Anokhin, vice president of the Russian Academy of Geopolitical Problems, told The Moscow Times. "The West should applaud this wise decision because it will contribute to appeasing tensions."

The Kremlin's announcement followed Putin's expression of support for the OSCE's roadmap for mitigating the conflict in Ukraine. The plan, devised by the organization's Swiss chairmanship earlier this month, focuses on deescalating tensions in Ukraine and encouraging talks on the decentralization of power in the country.

Despite international endorsement for the roadmap, violence continued in eastern Ukraine on Monday. One soldier was killed and three wounded in the city of Slovyansk when pro-Russian rebels opened fire on an army checkpoint, Ukraine's Defense Ministry said.

Contact the author at [g.tetraultfarber@imedia.ru](mailto:g.tetraultfarber@imedia.ru)

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