

Hundreds of Ukrainian Soldiers Defect to Russia, FSB Official Says

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Ukrainian servicemen take cover after firing a cannon during a military operation against pro-Russian separatists near Pervomaisk, Luhansk region.

More than 400 Ukrainian soldiers have crossed the border into Russia and deserted the Kiev government, news agency Interfax quoted a border security official as saying Monday. Ukraine confirmed the crossing but said the soldiers were forced into Russian territory by rebel fire.

Vasily Malayev, head of the Federal Security Service's border patrol in the Rostov region, told Interfax that 438 Ukrainian soldiers had reached Russia on Monday. By Monday afternoon, "more than 180" of them had been sent back to Ukraine, Malayev told RIA Novosti, adding that a vehicle transporting the men had already left for the Matveyev Kurgan checkpoint on the border.

The Ukrainian military confirmed that part of a brigade had most likely crossed into Russian

territory, although it disputed Russia's version of events and would not say how many soldiers had crossed the border.

A spokesman for the Ukrainian military operation in the east, Oleksiy Dmitrashkovsky, said troops from the army's 72nd brigade were penned into their position and came under a sustained barrage of rocket attacks from separatist forces. Rebel fighters fired for four hours from multiple heavy weapons, including tanks, mortars, artillery and Grad missile launchers, Dmitrashkovsky said, and eventually the brigade was forced to divide up into two sections to break out.

"One was meant to break out and join forces with a support unit. The other unit had the task of providing fire cover," Dmitrashkovsky said. "In doing that they fired their weapons until no ammunition remained, after which they abandoned their position and reached a place near a border crossing on Russian territory."

Dmitrashkovsky said it was too early to confirm how many soldiers had crossed into Russia.

"We do not have such information. The Russians are capable of claiming anything they want," he said.

Earlier Monday, Interfax reported that Russia's air force began military drills in central and western regions of the country, a move that could spark further fears that Moscow is ready to flex its military muscle in Ukraine.

The drills will start Monday and last through Friday, air force chief Igor Klimov was reported as saying, and will involve more than 100 fighter jets and helicopters.

Pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine have been battling the Kiev government since April, a conflict that has claimed at least 1,129 civilian casualties, according to a U.N. estimate. Ukraine and Western countries have accused Russia of providing the rebels with equipment and expertise, a claim that the Russian government has repeatedly denied.

Russia's Ministry of Defense could not be reached for comment.

Material from The Moscow Times is included in this report.

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[Russia to Stage Military Exercises Near Ukraine Border](#)

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